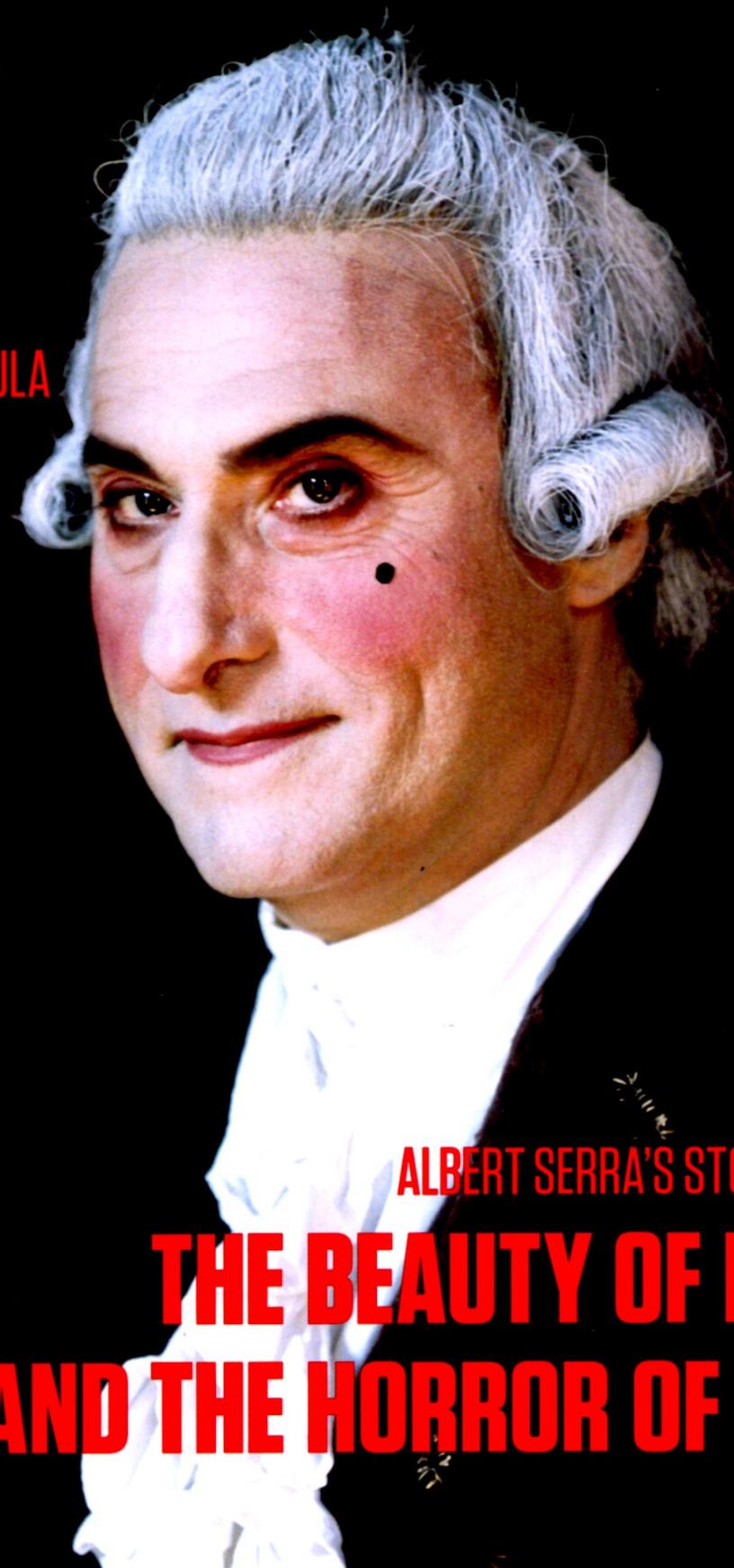


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# JOAQUIM PINTO TSAI MING-LIANG HONG SANGSOO JÚLIO BRESSANE JIM JARMUSCH LA ÚLTIMA PELÍCUL



# ALBERT SERRA'S STORY OF MY DEATH

# THE BEAUTY OF HORROR AND THE HORROR OF BEAUTY

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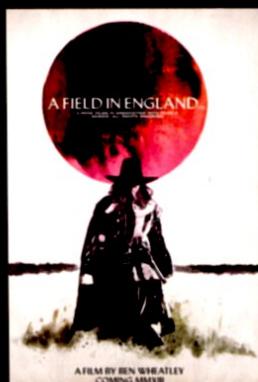
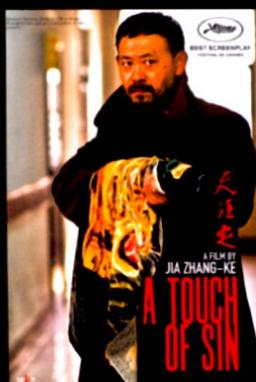
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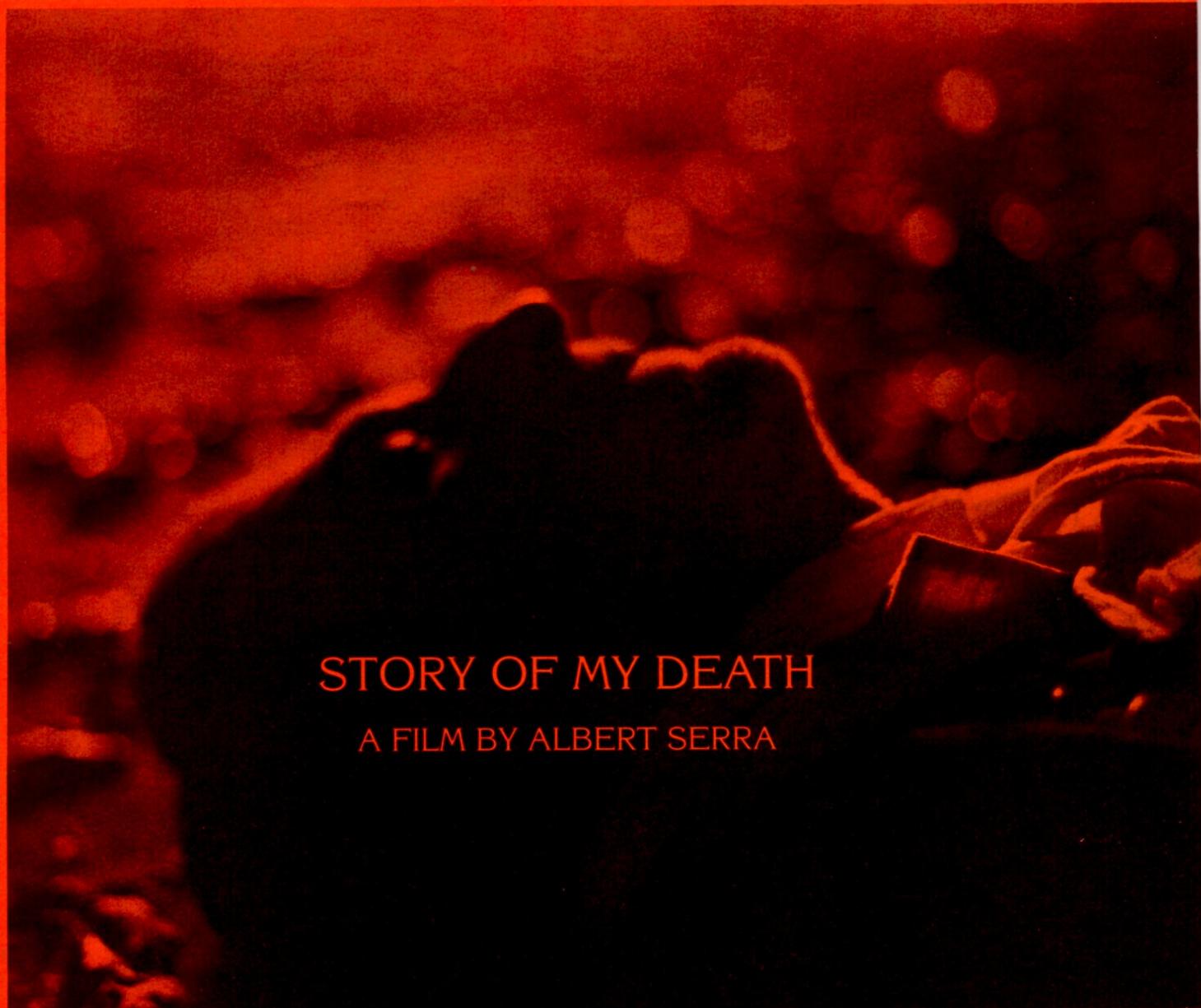


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# STORY OF MY DEATH

A FILM BY ALBERT SERRA

Produced by Andergraun Films and Capricci Films · In Associated Production with Televisió de Catalunya

Vicenç Altaió, Lluís Serrat, Noelia Rodenas, Clara Visa, Montse Triola, Eliseu Huertas,  
Mike Landscape, Lluís Carbó, Clàudia Robert and Xavier Pau

Producers: Montse Triola, Thierry Lounas, Albert Serra · Executive Producer: Montse Triola

Cinematographer: Jimmy Gimferrer · Cameras: Àngel Martin, Artur Tort

Sound: Joan Pons, Jordi Ribas · Editor: Albert Serra · Director of Production: Dan Burlac

Art Director: Mihnea Mihăilescu, Sebastian Vogler

Original Music: Ferran Font, Marc Verdaguer, Joe Robinson, Enric Juncà

A F  
Andergraun Film

Capricci



Generació de Catalunya  
Institut Català  
de les Empreses Culturals



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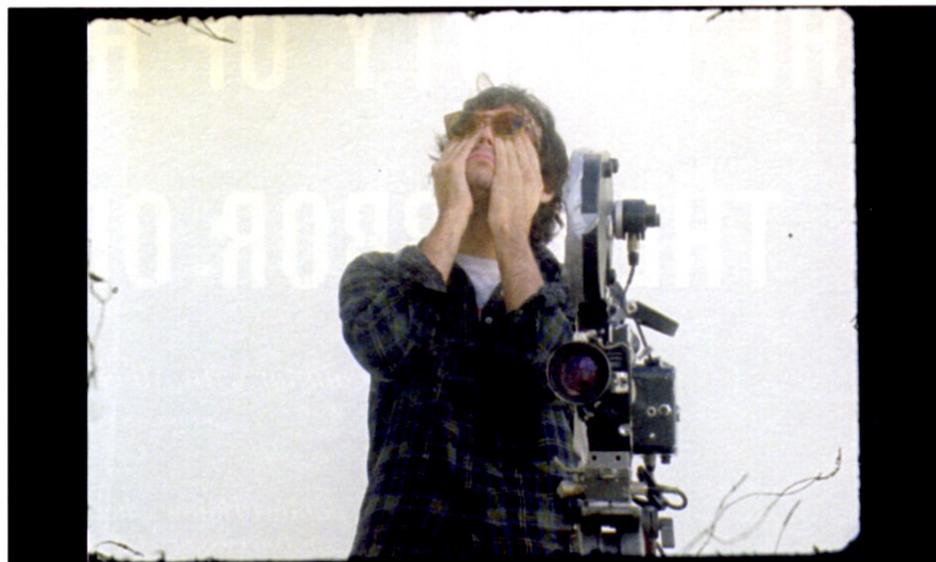
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# THE BEAUTY OF HORROR AND THE HORROR OF BEAUTY

*An Encounter with Albert Serra*

*"It is not necessary for the public to know whether I am joking or whether I am serious, just as it is not necessary for me to know it myself."*

—Salvador Dalí, *Diary of a Genius*



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BY MARK PERANSON

**Cinema Scope:** Let me repeat what I wrote about your film, namely that for me *Story of My Death* is a truly esoteric and unique work, something contemporary, yet totally free of constraints of time and space. The trappings might be historical and mythical, but your playground is cinematic language: the editing, acting, and photography, all of which are *sui generis*, contribute to a work of art that, as in an alchemic concoction, begins as waste, but eventually dazzles like gold. I would go so far as to say that this is a metaphor for your filmmaking as a whole, for reasons that we can get into later. But first some background about this film. You've made three feature-length films so far set in the past, featuring protagonists who are well-known historical/fictional characters: Don Quixote and Sancho Panza in *Honor of the Knights* (2006), and the Three Wise Men in *Birdsong* (2008). What attracts you to making films about historical subjects, and why in this case did you choose Casanova and Dracula?

**Albert Serra:** In the beginning it was because it was simply easier for me to work with historical and literary figures, because if you use subjects or characters who nobody knows, you need to take too much time telling something about the character. You know, you need some practical shots, some development, so people will understand who the person is, why, what's happening...so in *Honor of the Knights* I decided to use Don Quixote so I could focus on atmosphere, on details, on things I love better than just showing the plot or trying to give information about the characters. With these characters you have more or less all the information and, well, then I can do whatever I want, I am free, and I don't care about being more or less faithful to the original source or character that comes from literature or history. So in some sense I have the total freedom, but at the same time there's the positive notion that the audience has the information about the characters, and perhaps I can be less than perfectly faithful and they will understand that...it's useful. Also this idea of talking about the old Europe was very appealing to me, as I studied literature and art history and I was always interested in all of these subjects, these books, these characters.

Well, all the characters except Dracula—I wasn't interested in him at all. In fact, I tried to read Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and I couldn't; I thought it was very bad and very boring. But I was in Romania showing *Honor of the Knights*, and there was a Romanian producer who told me that I should do the same thing with Dracula as I did with Don Quixote. At the beginning I didn't like the idea because I'd never seen any fantastic films, or almost any, I hate them—eventually I watched some to prepare for this film. This suggestion was like a joke to me, but slowly it built up in my mind, and eventually I thought it would be a challenge, a beautiful challenge. But obviously I couldn't follow the whole Dracula mythology, nor could I only make a film about Dracula.

So I decided to mix it with some imaginary that is closer to my universe, that is closer to my imagination, and this was Casanova. At the same time I was reading Casanova's memoirs, *Story of My Life*, and I realized that Casanova and Dracula share some themes, some thoughts about desire, perhaps pleasure, about the night, so I said, why not, we will have this typical 18th-century atmosphere, the light, the mundane...the rationalism, this open-minded desire of communication of everything, which you see with Casanova talking all throughout the film about Europe, women, food: possessing this desire of really being in contact with the world and trying to place rational thought on it. And it could be interesting to merge this with the other side of the coin, the beginning of Romanticism at the start of the 19th century, which is exactly the opposite, because in Romanticism there is no communication with the world. Dracula is closed in his metaphysical thinking, and is violent, not rationalistic, with a more sexual, not sensual, way of being. I thought this could be a beautiful question for the film: Where is the real pleasure, or where is the real desire? Where do the characters find the actual satisfaction for their desire? In the mundane side, in the light side of Casanova, or in the more dark side of Dracula? And in the end it looks like Dracula wins, and people feel more pleasure in the pain, or in the guilty things, and perhaps the film is ultimately about the dark side of our lives. I wanted to make a film about the night, and what happens in the night, when real desires appear.

**Scope:** Do you think that our world has changed much since that time?

**Serra:** No, it's an eternal dialectical fight, so it's as contemporary as ever. Perhaps what has become more esoteric nowadays is the politics, but regarding sexuality or desire, it has always been a difficult subject. A friend of mine told me that this is a film about hypocrisy, and this is beautiful to me, because when you see the film, and even think about it afterwards, you never know where exactly the real desire of people begins or ends, what they really want, where the control of somebody over someone else ends, how or where this person can mask his or her real desire, where fatality arrives. You cannot avoid what happens, or you cannot avoid your own desire...perhaps it's really a film about hypocrisy, all the time the characters are hiding, you never know what they think or what they feel.

**Scope:** The only character who doesn't behave in this manner is Pompeu, Casanova's manservant. In the first part of the film, he struggles with his debts, losing at cards; in the second half, he pines for one of the Romanian servant girls and is rebuffed. Lluis Serrat, aka Sancho, who plays Pompeu, is a non-professional actor from Banyoles you've used in all your films. Did you write the role specifically for him? And also, how do you see his character as different from the other characters in *Story of My Death*?

**Serra:** Yes, of course, I mean, I didn't write the character *per se*, but it was obvious from the beginning that he would play him. I don't know anybody else who could shoot with me or work with me in this way. In some sense he's a tragic figure—more than just an actor, because as a person he's so pure. This



film is a little bit more sophisticated and he's self-conscious of how he has to act—it's very calculated and controlled, but he remains a pure figure, and in some sense he's out of place. What is tragic is that he has kept his innocence in a film that has no innocence at all. When you see the last scene where he's bitten and he stumbles off before collapsing, you don't know if it's real, or if it's a comic scene, what he's doing exactly, because he never finds his place in the film. You lose a little bit of credibility in this moment—you don't know exactly what the tone or atmosphere is—but it's very beautiful, I really love it, because his innocence there, that exists all throughout the previous films, here comes to the highest point of contrast with the other characters, with the way I shoot, with my own life, with everything. Now, in real life, he's not drinking anymore, he's taking pills to help him stop, which is why he doesn't want to come to festivals as he's afraid he'll start drinking again, so it's another tragedy, of not finding his place in the film or in the world. They are the same.

**Scope:** You said you weren't interested in fantasy films, but for me the film exists in a fantasy realm: it's inhabited by people and characters who behave and act and are photographed and edited in a different way in the real world, but also other movies as well. It's almost like an extended dream state.

**Serra:** Well, that was the idea. I wanted to make a real fantasy that has nothing to do with our lives, and with images that have nothing in common with what we have seen before. It's a bit hard to explain, but the characters and the beauty of the film should exist only in the film. These characters are born only in the film—nothing is related to the original source. The idea was to put it in materiality, even if it's a fantasy.

**Scope:** In your other films, your scripts mainly consisted of sketches for scenes and actions, without any written dialogue. It's different in *Story of My Death* in that there is something resembling a typical script, with written dialogues, and many lit-

erary references, like Voltaire for example. Why did you want to write more dialogues, and was it more difficult to shoot than the previous films because of the dialogue?

**Serra:** No, I don't think so. I'm quite proud of the dialogues, I think they are very beautiful. I am always looking for beauty, and I don't care if it's coherent or not...No, in fact it was easier to shoot this film. I've been working in theatre the last few years also, so that helped. I didn't use dialogues in earlier films maybe because it was boring to me, but here it is interesting, some of the Casanova speeches are quite okay. If not it would be too much fantasy, no? And the idea was to create this level with some interesting historical or philosophical dialogues, but always inside a strange, fantasy plot. This was the main goal, to mix important things inside another film that is not important at all, something that is very strange, that is not a serious thing, namely Dracula.

This film was created in the same spirit as my other films, but I'm trying to add new things each time. I use non-professional actors, and always will, as I hate professional actors. I like to put some absurdity inside the films, because I think it's funny, and I also like improvisation, because it creates problems in the shooting. I keep the three or four rules that I had at the beginning, but here it's in the context of a more complex film, with a more complex subject, with more dialogues, a little bit more plot. I'm only focused on the film, I don't think about my career, and for this reason I don't think about the audience either. The audience is not interesting: sometimes they are right, sometimes they are wrong. But it's by chance always. Sometimes they love the film for the wrong reasons; it happens very often. How can you be proud of achieving success if people love the film for the wrong reasons? And the opposite is also true. I don't care about the audience.

**Scope:** The other day you said that your film is "unfuckable." Can you clarify what you mean by that?



**Serra:** I said that in a workshop for young film critics. I said that my films are unfuckable in the context of film criticism, in that you have to take the whole thing or leave it. The films are so radical and special in themselves that there are no weak points: they are impossible to criticize. There are no mistakes inside, you simply cannot find bad things in the film. It's not exactly that they're flawless, what's important is the concept, that it's unfuckable...it's the whole thing that's good or bad. To put it in more extreme terms, it's excellent or horrible. You cannot think about my cinema in subtle terms. And I always think that my films, and some other films, are unfuckable because they are beyond criticism.

**Scope:** How much of that is a factor of the editing? You had over 440 hours of material to work with, you disposed of dozens of specific scenes, and in the end I would say that *Story of My Death* is very strangely edited. I don't think I've seen a film edited in this way: it's of a piece, and it's significantly different from your other films in terms of the pacing and also the cutting within the scenes. There's an individual sensibility that comes through in the editing. This is the idea of turning shit into gold that I was mentioning earlier, and which we literally see in *Story of My Death*. And which I think is an impulse I think we all strive for both in art and in life.

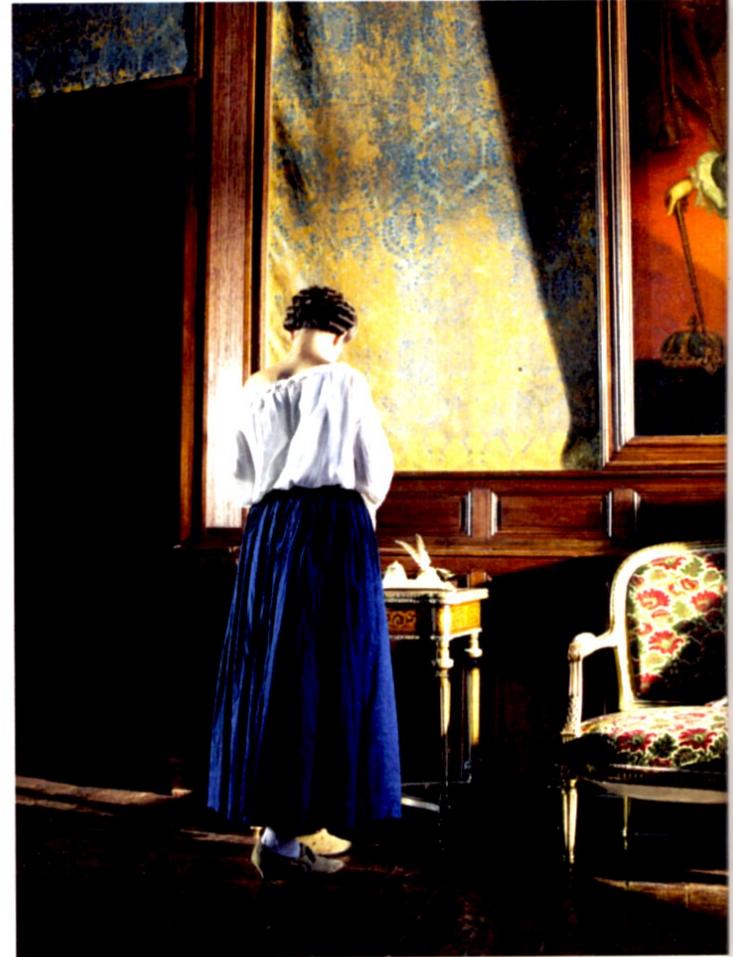
**Serra:** Yes, this is very important. My objective when I shoot the film is just to shoot interesting things, to create something strange that, in the edit, will help to create a global coherence. In some sense it's unfuckable because the whole shooting is a mistake...on the other hand the edit is so precise, using material that at the beginning is not perfect, with lots of small things that aren't coherent. The original material is free, and I create coherence, and this coherence can only exist because I decide on it in the edit. So nobody can compare it to something that exists previously, or criticize it in comparison to the script, and say perhaps I could have done this or that in another way.

When you see the film you cannot see the process. You just see the final product, and that's the only thing that you imagine. But this is after the shooting. And this is why it's unfuckable, because you don't have the traces, you don't know what the idea was in the beginning, what was happening in the shooting, so you cannot compare it.

This one I edited myself, as my friend, Ángel Martín, who was also one of the cameramen on *Story of My Death*, and who helped out editing the others, was very tired after editing the 100-hour documenta installation, *The Three Little Pigs*. It's very interesting because sometimes in the edit the conversations are completely created out of nothing. For the first scene where Carmen talks with Dracula by the river in the day, I had two hours of mostly improvised dialogue, with different answers, different questions, and in the edit I put one question with another answer. But during all the shooting the answers were not for the specific questions, say 60 to 80 percent of time. They said the sentences in the course of the shooting, but not in that order. So they are beautiful dialogues because they are very natural, quotidian, and spontaneous, but they are more original than that because it was not "written," nobody thought that the dialogue would end up in that way...it was done in the edit.

**Scope:** In that scene the actors aren't facing the camera, and you don't see the lips of the characters moving.

**Serra:** Yes, this kind of scene is easier to edit, but I used it in a lot in scenes where there is cutting between the characters as well. Psychologically when the actor knows that he has to say something, and knows what the other actor will answer, you can see it in his eyes, he announces that, and it's a little bit boring. But if the answer breaks what the eyes of the questioner announce, this gets more ambiguous, and there is more life inside. This is something that I got used to in the previous films, shooting a lot, never repeating the same take, but never



to this extent. But it's very hard. If there are two hours worth of material, say, I have to write out all the dialogues just to know where I am. For example, the scene early on where Casanova is talking with the poet, which for me is one of the most beautiful scenes in the film, the questions and the answers are interesting, all the subjects of the dialogue...I had five or six pages of dialogue, and I had to compose the order. It's all created in the edit. All, absolutely all, they never answer in that order in that way. The spirit is the same, but not the content.

**Scope:** As someone who has to edit interviews, such as this one, I understand exactly what you mean. But this in a way is the key to your filmmaking: the mixture of the artificial and the natural working together in interesting ways. Among others, it reminds me of Bresson and Straub.

**Serra:** Yes, this is perfect. I spent a lot of time developing this technique. I think perhaps I am the person in the world who has gone furthest with this technique when it comes to dealing with dialogue scenes. Because I can tell you nobody has seven hours of different chaotic dialogue, writes it down, and pores over it for days, because it's very difficult, you get lost, it takes a lot of time...you lose days trying to edit one scene. And it's very boring to do this work. But you have to do it because in the end you get the artificial existing at the perfectly same level as the natural.

**Scope:** Over the last few years you took kind of a hiatus from features and worked in the art world, as you said, making a long installation film for documenta that recently screened as part of a retrospective in the Centre Pompidou, as well as two pieces for museums in Barcelona, *The Names of Christ* (2010) and *The Lord Worked Wonders in Me* (2010). To what extent has working in the art world changed your way of thinking and working?

**Serra:** Yes, it's changed a little bit, because in the art world you have more freedom, and you can do whatever you want, and you are still unfuckable because there nobody knows anything and there is a great amount of confusion there as to what is good or bad, or what is important or not, so I realized that I feel at home there. In this confusion, or this chaos, which is similar to what I try to create in my shooting, there is a suspension of judgement. And this is beautiful, and I try to apply this to the films, but at the same time I try to keep the innocence in the films. Because more than in art, films are about innocence. When you start with a feature, you have to be a believer, and to be a believer is to have innocence. It's like if you believe in God: you cannot ask questions, you cannot criticize God, you trust him. For me, in a feature film you have to be innocent, you have to trust in what you are doing. In the art world there is more calculation, it's more speculative work, and it's more about language. But I tried to be very, very speculative in the art world,



because this speculation helps you to improve some details in the films; it makes you more clever. But then you have to keep the innocence and you have to be a believer.

**Scope:** Speaking of art, what made you cast Vicenç Altaió, who plays Casanova? In his daily life he is an art curator in Barcelona, not an actor.

**Serra:** Because he looks like Casanova! If you see his profile, and you see some paintings or drawings of Casanova, he looks like him. It was intuition. I wanted a guy who liked women, girls, and a guy with a big dick. And he has all these things. And at the end when you see him in the movie you realize it was a good selection. The other day at a party he immediately got naked just to show himself off to people. Because people who have these attributes, like Errol Flynn and Clint Eastwood, I think, love to do that just to humiliate other people.

But as you know I've never done any rehearsals before shooting. For all of my films, the first day of the shooting is the first day I work with the actors. So it is a matter of faith—I don't know any more information, I just have my intuition. When I pick someone I have the heart, and an intense intuition that it will work. And up to now I have always been right, at least with the main characters. I always say something simple, but it's a quote that has a lot of truth inside: "There are no good or bad actors, there are only good or bad filmmakers." I can make anybody a good actor, it's just a matter of time. If I choose the right

one it's easier and it's faster, but I could do it with everybody...

**Scope:** Could you go into some detail about how you worked on the sound of the movie? It's an important part, both in the use of silence and the louder parts, such as the strangely exaggerated sounds of Casanova eating, where consumption of food is obviously taking the place of sex. You're also using music to a large extent for the first time.

**Serra:** What is important in the sound is how it relates to the multiple levels or layers of the film. In the scenes of daily life that are very quotidian, the actors play the roles in a very naturalistic way, and ideally there the sound should be very natural. But at the same time there are different degrees even within the same scenes. When you see, for example, the scene at the end where Pompeu is eating the apples with the servant girl, you have this one movie which is a genre movie, with Dracula, and the girl is trying to bite him, and you also have this other movie, which is closer to what I have done before, which is free improvisation, talking about...it doesn't matter what. Anything. And you have also the metaphysical film, a literary film, with the spectre of death hanging over the action. So in the same scene you have three or four films or layers, and you don't know which film is the one you are seeing because there is no hierarchy established between them.

With the sound this becomes difficult, as for the most part in the second half of the film there was this problematic, that

the sound should be naturalistic when the actors are behaving naturalistically—in other words, it should correspond to one of these films, these layers. But sometimes I used very naturalistic sound mixed with very artificial dialogue or action, and sometimes the opposite. Sometimes I made extremely artificial what is natural. For example, when Casanova is eating, the sound that comes from his mouth is very loud and almost artificial-sounding, even though it's recorded live—there was a microphone in his wig, behind his ear, recording things. It was a very difficult balance to find, but it was always in between these artificial or non-natural things, closer to the metaphysical film, or the more natural and quotidian thing related to the way the actors play the roles, and this freedom that is always inside every film. You must feel the naturalism.

The main characteristic of my previous style, even here where there is a more complex plot, with different layers of filmmaking, is that inside the scenes themselves there is always the same freedom. I tried to make it a bit more mannerist in some places, which I was not used to, but just to change it a little bit—the film is different, so the sound should be different. I decided to use music also, I don't know...it's all part of trying to keep what I liked in the previous films and trying to go further.

In most author cinema today, the idea is to empty things as much as possible, to just be left with the structure, to make the film more pure. But here it's the opposite, I was always adding things, adding layers, with the historical, the philosophical, the metaphysical, the plot, the dialogues...still trying at the end to have the same purity, but by other means. And the sound, I think it's great. It's subtle, sometimes, some things are done on purpose, some times it sounds like a mistake, sometimes it is a mistake...it's difficult. There is also a lot of foley work, which I never used before: in one scene the sound is completely constructed out of nothing. This balance of artificial and natural in some places is not so obvious, it keeps the ambiguity and it's very beautiful.

**Scope:** Can you talk about the compositional aspects of the film, the look of the image, and why you decided to use the CinemaScope frame for the first time?

**Serra:** This is a very interesting question, but it takes a long time to explain. A very, very long story, but to make it short: in fact, all the cameramen shot the film for 4:3, and in the middle of the shooting I realized it was better in 2.35. But I didn't tell them. So they composed the whole film for 4:3, which is exactly the opposite of 2.35. But then you get an image that is very strange, sometimes, because there is a lot of empty space, an absurd composition, because in editing I had to choose the upper part or the lower part, and this creates a completely new compositional style. So I think my main contribution was simply that, not telling the cinematographer during the shooting.

But I'm rarely focused on the composition of the shot, because I'm shooting with two or three cameras, depending on the scene, on the place, and I give the cinematographers a lot of freedom. I check the frame very rarely, only in a few cases. Here the idea was brilliant...it's new. It never looks like it was composed because it was not composed! It was composed for 4:3, and it's absolutely the opposite of 2.35. But it shares some-

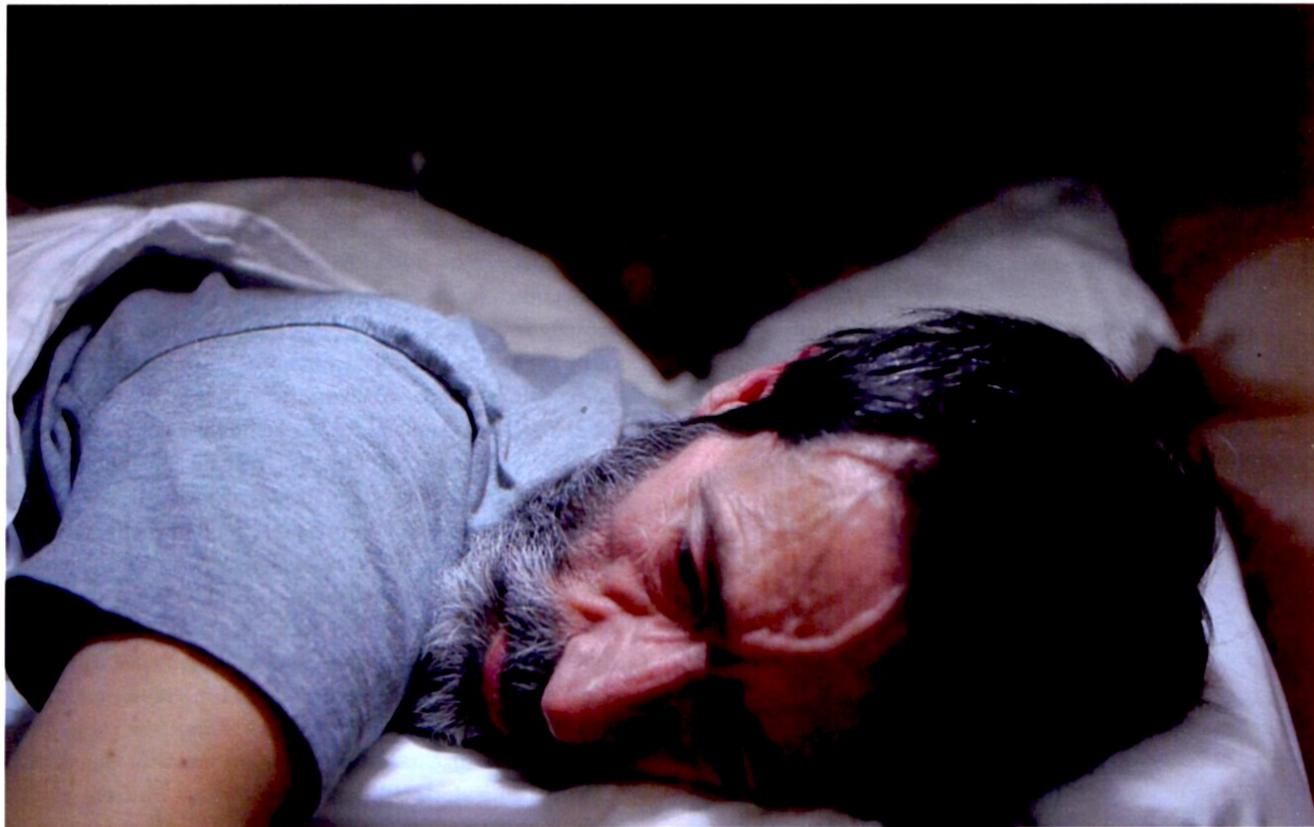
thing with the way I work, which is based on the rejection of communication, even with actors. I know what I want—perhaps I don't even know—but I don't communicate this with actors or with technicians. I never say what they have to do. It's a rule that I discovered was better from the very beginning—you know, like Andy Warhol, don't judge your own work, don't judge what you're doing. But I do this in an even more radical way. I openly reject communication with people.

It's complicated, because at the beginning we were shooting with the Alexa, which I didn't like, then we changed to another one, and then another...Nobody has invented a camera that suits my purposes, that is mobile, that can shoot well in the dark, that can be close to the actors, that can record hours of improvisation without needing to stop to change cards...We were in Romania, in the middle of nowhere, we had two Alexas, two Sonys, two Panasonics. The producer in Romania said that even Ridley Scott never had 12 cameras on the set. In the end we used the same Panasonic camera that we used on *Honor of the Knights*, which is not pure HD. It was a little bit of a mess, but I like to create a mess, because what counts is inspiration, not technical things. Technical things are boring. And it's a way I also can put irony in the work of technicians. Because if irony doesn't enter into the equation, the shooting will be boring.

When you work with non-professional actors, technique has to follow actors, not the other way around. If the actors are inspired, and you have to wait one hour to prepare lights, or the camera, then by the time you're ready to shoot, they won't be inspired. The moment is that moment. If the actors are not inspired, you lose 80 percent of the quality of the film. If the light is not perfect you lose one or two percent of the quality. For me it's always about putting in some chaos...sometimes when I'm editing, sure, I regret it. But this chaos also gives me the chance to explore more variations in the editing, because there's no possibility to play it safe: you have to work in a more subtle way. This was the first time I went so far in terms of the camera...I think nobody else in history has done it. I am almost sure I am the only one, the first and maybe the last. Related to cinematography what else can you do? How can you annoy a cinematographer any more?

**Scope:** Lastly, as we are in Locarno, and you've just won the Golden Leopard, I have to ask why you set the first part of the film in a castle in Switzerland?

**Serra:** Well, I needed to put something there, and I didn't want to put France because it was boring—the word is boring, not the country. Switzerland is as boring as France. But I thought the graphic of the lettering was boring. But Switzerland in Catalan, "Suïssa" with the two points, it looked better...People think I did this because the film was sent to Locarno, but Suïssa was there from the beginning. We had to choose a place for the second part of the film, and we were thinking of Romania, but then chose "Sud del Carpathians," which is an area and not a specific country. But for the beginning I wanted to choose a state, having to do with this rationalist side of Casanova. I also thought of Spain, but that wouldn't work because it's horrible, and Italy I didn't like because it was too typical for Casanova...it's the solidity of a proper state. And Switzerland will be there forever.



# A TRUCK FULL OF TURKEYS

*Thoughts on Joaquim Pinto's *What Now? Remind Me**

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BY FRANCISCO FERREIRA

Where do films come from? I won't fixate too long on this question, as no one is qualified to answer it. There are films that are more unexpected than others, that's for sure. Sometimes, there are even films that seem to have come from nothing, that sprout up like stalks of wild grass. Such films witness the brittleness of what it is to live, of what it is to shoot. The 56-year-old Portuguese director Joaquim Pinto has made such a film, with the help of his long-time partner Nuno Leonel, and called it *What Now? Remind Me* (*E Agora? Lembre-me*). Our thinking begins with this title, which posits that its author has already vanished. The more the film exposes itself, and does so with a bright frankness rarely seen in cinema, the more mysterious it becomes. The enigma starts with the question in the title, a present that calls from the past and projects itself into the future. We will be guided through a logbook, literally the film of one life, but more than that. As we will see, the inexorabil-

ity of time and the miracle of life will be called on as well. Is cinema a "gift from destiny," as Serge Daney once said to Jean-Luc Godard in one of his radio interviews? We could start from here.

It's not easy to start writing about *What Now? Remind Me*. Once we get into the film, we are glued to it, like a novel we just can't put down. Pinto gives us some help, presenting himself, in voiceover, in the first minutes: "My name is Joaquim. My life is uneventful. I live with Nuno. We're married. Together we've travelled the world. Or the world has seen us pass by." He looks at infinity. In front of him, there is a landscape on fire. Shortly after that, he shows us the X-ray of his smile, but we could swear the threat of death is disguised just behind it. Meanwhile, Pinto explains himself. He tells how he unsuccessfully tried all treatments available in Portugal for Hepatitis C, which, in co-infection with HIV—Pinto has been living with both for almost 20 years—has developed into cirrhosis. He tells how he agreed to be a subject for an experimental clinical study in Madrid: "It's like feeling one's will disconnected from one's body." He also adds that the film we are about to

see is a one-year notebook of those studies, a diary of one year of forced stasis where Pinto had the chance to open old boxes, and revisit his life and his memories.

Do we go to the cinema like we go to the doctor to heal our diseases? Can we see a film as if it were a clinical symptom? About these two questions, Pinto doesn't say a word; they come from my imagination. But I couldn't stop thinking about them when I saw *What Now? Remind Me* for the first time. As we see, Pinto starts making his film alone, as Nuno doesn't want to participate, either in front of the camera, or in its making. Pinto testifies to his constant effort to stay alive. Much later, we'll come to understand that the role of Nuno has gradually become stronger and stronger, as if the couple's lives themselves depend on this relationship. Joaquim and Nuno have lived together for two decades since they both became infected. Nevertheless, what I felt from the film is that their relationship is something that is being built up day by day, as if Joaquim the narrator had to "conquer" the character of Nuno little by little to bring him into the film, at last sealing a love story that unites all things.

There are many more stories to tell about *What Now? Remind Me*, and the richness of the film is in large part due to them. Pinto has led an extraordinary life that deserves some time to be explained. (The film doesn't start with a long shot of a slug crawling across the screen by accident: it would be useless to rush into a film like this.) Born in 1957, in Oporto (as were Manoel de Oliveira, Paulo Rocha, and António Reis, the three members of the vital axis of modern Portuguese cinema), Pinto belongs to a generation amputated by HIV in the '80s. A witness of that time, Pinto met the French writer Guy Hocquenghem in New York, as well as the Chilean editor Claudio Martinez (to whom the film is dedicated), Copi (aka Raúl Damonte Botana), an Argentinian actor based in Paris, German writer and actor Kurt Raab (famous for his roles in Fassbinder's movies), Serge Daney, Derek Jarman, and Manfred Salzgeber, founder and former director of the Berlinale's Panorama section (who selected Pinto's two features, about which more later)—all of them Pinto's friends, all of them to eventually perish from AIDS.

It's august company, and one that Pinto fully earned his place within—in a way, he has been the heart of Portuguese cinema for most of the last 30 years. Already working as a technician at the RTP television station when he began studying at the Lisbon Film School at the end of the '70s, Pinto entered the world of cinema by doing the sound on Raúl Ruiz's mythical horror film *The Territory* (1981) and quickly became a leading sound recordist in the Portuguese film industry, while at the same time starting a career as a producer and director. (These two facets of Pinto's career are crucial to keep in mind when trying to parse *What Now? Remind Me*.) After creating the G.E.R. production company, Pinto began a passionate and turbulent professional relationship and friendship with João César Monteiro, producing two of the director's masterpieces, *Recollections of the Yellow House* (1989) and *God's Comedy* (1995), as well as other important Portuguese films in the '90s, e.g., Teresa Villaverde's debut *Alex* (*A Idade Maior*, 1991).

As a director Pinto has a lesser-known role, despite the great beauty of his two first features, on which he also served as cinematographer: *Tall Stories* (*Uma Pedra no Bolso*, 1988) and *Where the Sun Beats* (*Onde Bate o Sol*, 1989), both of which had very limited circulation after their world premieres in Berlin; the second never even opened commercially in Portugal. (It's a pity that, due to rights issues, these two important contributions to Portuguese cinema in the '80s are virtually invisible nowadays, but after 25 years Pinto is now in the process of reacquiring and rereleasing both films.) *Tall Stories* follows teenager Miguel, who goes to study for his final high-school exams at his aunt's modest hotel by the seaside. There he meets an older girl and a local fisherman; both disrupt his peace of mind and deceive him. In *Where the Sun Beats*, homosexuality is more present in the plot that surrounds Nuno, a boy in his late teens. During a summer vacation, he finds himself involved in a complex and prejudiced web of lies and social issues concerning his bourgeois family, at the same time growing closer to his new friend, a local worker on his eldest sister's farm. Although set in different contexts, both films are coming-of-age stories about two young men, both are very tense narratives involving issues of identity and sexuality, both start with initiatory journeys from the big city to the countryside, and both are guided by the voiceovers of their main characters—which makes it hardly surprising that Pinto himself takes over this narrational role in *What Now? Remind Me*.

There's clearly an emotional and melancholic feel in the film through Pinto's voiceover, but that melancholy becomes political when he points out during his treatment the shortcomings of a current health service still full of absurd, bureaucratic rules. Avoiding strict social realism and constructing its political message in a much more subtle way, it seems to me that *What Now? Remind Me* doesn't have the pretension to speak in the name of a generation, nor does it desire to raise a flag in the fight against AIDS. It is also inconsistent to approach this film as some kind of terminal-care experience, in the manner of such powerful first-person testimonies as Hervé Guibert's *La pudeur ou l'impudeur* (1992) or Jarman's *Blue* (1993), because Pinto's point of view is luckily coming from that of a survivor. At the same time, a sense of irony necessarily pops up. One of the funniest moments of the film comes when we see Pinto writing on his laptop, exchanging clinical symptoms and prescriptions by mail with Jo Santos, an old friend based in Paris whom he has not seen for over ten years. (She underwent the same treatment as the director and accompanied him to Locarno, where the film was awarded the Special Jury Prize.) It's difficult to express the beauty of the fact that one reason Pinto made his movie was to reconnect with a longtime friend, to make him feel less alone in his adventure—I'll only risk saying that if all films were made like this, surely cinema would not be as miserable as it is today.

Another leap must be made now in this text to avoid betraying the film's amazing polyphonic structure. (I wonder if this *savoir faire* may in fact come only from someone who's very familiar with sound mixing.) A compulsive music lover

like none other in Portuguese cinema (except for Monteiro). Pinto finds a very sportive way to articulate all the elements of his film with reality, crossing past and present, sacred and profane, pleasure and pain, the epic and mundane gestures of life with such a natural grace that the film becomes an experience of pure gold. The viewer never feels uncomfortable each time Pinto invites him or her to enter a new door. And there are dozens of doors here to knock on (like dozens of potential soundtracks coming from a mixing table). I'll try to propose some, keeping in mind a very beautiful thought that I heard from someone in Locarno: "Here's a film where one might remember every single shot after just one screening." Must this utopian idea be taken seriously in a 164-minute film? Of course not. However, I strangely felt the same kind of illusion the first time I saw it.

But it's important to add here another short biographical note. Living together more or less since the director fell ill in the early '90s, Joaquim and Nuno (who meanwhile kept making short animated films) travelled to Brazil, where they spent some time during that decade, then moved to Santa Maria in the Azores. As mentioned in the film, their return to the Portuguese mainland is relatively recent, due to Joaquim's health problems. During their Brazilian stay, and then in the Azores, they signed a handful of short documentaries shot in a very direct way that I'd love to highlight: *Surfavela* (1996), a portrait of a group of teens from a Rio de Janeiro slum learning to surf, and *Com cuspe e jeito se bota no cu do sujeito* (1997), which observes a transvestite cook making a typical Brazilian plate, *feijoada à brasileira*. Together, they also directed the very good feature *Rabo de Peixe* (2003), about the work of the fisherman community of the eponymous small Azorean town, situated in the north of São Miguel Island.

Why have these smaller films become so important now? Because they are the germs of a cinema practice based in a documentary effect that Joaquim resumes at a certain point in *What Now? Remind Me*, after confessing: "Filming became just one more activity in our daily lives." At no point does Pinto sacralize the act of shooting; rather, he embraces everything reality has to give, like a beautiful moment where Nuno talks with their old neighbour Deolinda about youth nowadays. Pinto trusts each one of his images to stand as evidence of a moment being lived, and trusted himself to discover a film in the editing room, where everything except the voice was essentially improvised. The organization of these images releases a thousand stories that takes us often back and forth in time, but this is not "time travel"—the point is that there is no hierarchical order between these various eras. Pinto measures his personal ghosts, his deepest thoughts about humankind, the life of his four dogs, and the movement of a bee that flies into the frame to share his hamburger, exactly at the same level, creating with this gesture something that's rare: an autobiographical movie that completely detaches from self-centredness.

There is a book in the movie, a fabulous and mystical one, illustrated by one of the most important figures of the Renaissance in Portugal, Francisco de Holanda (1517-1585). Housed in the National Library in Madrid, *De Aetatibus Mundi*



#### What Now? Remind Me

*Imagenes (The Illustrated Ages of the World)* tells us the story of the world in images, and its importance in the organization of the film is crucial. When Pinto, loaded with pills and interferon, remembers his time in East Germany (where he met a certain "activist" named Angela Merkel while living in Leipzig), when he leaves a car with Nuno, extinguisher on hand, to fight a fire, or approaches a pack of dogs abandoned by their owners, when Pinto has sex with his partner, goes down the Castro da Columbeira caves, questions the Neanderthals, and quotes, like Monteiro, the Portuguese poet Ruy Belo, Saint Augustine, or the Gospel According to Mark, there's something chimeric that comes from the Francisco de Holanda book that acts like a contagion in the film's structure, changing our perception of reality. As Pinto said to me, *What Now? Remind Me* "is a combat movie: by exposing itself, it invites the exposition of those who see it."

How small are we in this world? How fair are we with ourselves and our own lives? Freed from problems of ego and willing to touch the cosmos, *What Now? Remind Me* nobly finds multiple ways to ask us these kinds of questions before leaving us with a long look at a truck full of turkeys on their way to holiday slaughter—one more shot that fell from destiny. This last image functions as a coda for an everyday life that has become fantastic, a life experience that has become unmeasured. Is it out of line to talk about transcendence in a film that thanks the Holy Father and waves farewell with a wish of Merry Christmas?

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*Sentimental Education*

# KILLED THE FAMILY AND WENT TO THE MOVIES

*The Sentimental Education of Júlio Bressane*

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*“Auteur cinema is precisely that cinema which has no author.”*

—Júlio Bressane

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BY CELLULOID LIBERATION FRONT

When approaching the films of Júlio Bressane, one is immediately faced with perplexing questions. How to articulate the essence of such visceral, almost pre-linguistic work? How to digest the regurgitated fruits of cultural anthropophagi? How to illuminate with words a cinema that is more sensorial than narrative? What is cinema (without an audience)? For most of his incompliant career, Bressane's films have been invisible, a

private popular cinema unfit for any typology of film festivity or classification. A self-consuming and self-effacing light, his work is an attempt to transcend authorial individualism and free the artistic ego from the burden of “creativity.” When *Face to Face (Cara a Cara, 1967)*, Bressane's debut feature, was presented in Cannes and earned the plaudits of Glauber Rocha, the clerics of world cinema thought that another star of *Cinema Novo* was born. But nothing could have been further from the tropico-revolutionary complacency so coveted by the European bourgeoisie of the time than what Bressane (de)generated from that point onwards.

right: *Lágrima pantera*  
far right: *Sentimental Education*



Eager expectations were soon frustrated when, two years later, *The Angel Was Born* (*O anjo nasceu*) and *Killed the Family and Went to the Movies* (*Matou a família e foi ao cinema*) hurled themselves against the screens of Brazilian cinema. These two films marked the beginning of Bressane's poetic mutiny, which lasts to this day—a lifework on the run, fleeing its own creative self. Bressane's is an intuitive and erudite cinema that survived in obscurity like a treasure at sea, combining insanity with grace, aggression with meditation, instinct with vision, culpability with innocence.

The most intransigent and incoherent love letter to the cinema ever made, *Killed the Family and Went to the Movies* is a film of no return, an unforgivable affront to the left-wing episcopacy that monopolized art cinema in the '60s and '70s. Here the Brazilian director declares his aversion towards rhetorical convenience and stylistic opportunism, instead lacerating the flesh of perception. The spectator gasps for a logical succession of signs only to be submerged by a chaotic multiplicity of them; crime and the criminal repel audiences' identification. The protagonist kills his family and goes to a movie theatre; there, a movie is playing featuring the same actors of *Killed the Family*. Scenes (better still, obsess-scenes) of liberated and immodest Sapphic love, murder, and formal cruelty perturb this work of visionary barbarity.

Felonious lowlives (a white and a black man in a black-and-white film) are also the protagonists of *The Angel Was Born*, an even cruder ode to the senseless abandon of violence and its (in)defensible, anti-authoritarian charm. To the social violence of the protagonists corresponds an aesthetic violence against the grammar of cinema; dead time is brought back to life via iconographic exasperation. To the "suspension of disbelief," Bressane opposes the "strangling of any belief."

When even the most subversive tendencies are canonized, packaged, and fetishized, then the critical discourse necessitates unruly children to keep its horizons open and truly utopian. It is precisely in this reckless vein that Bressane and fellow Brazilian filmmaker Rogerio Sganzerla founded Belair Productions sometime between 1969 and early 1970, seeking to create "Neither personal and subjective nor impersonal and objective, but a multi-personal and poly-subjective cinema." A clandestine earthquake, Belair remains one of the peaks of quixotic film production. A mocking homage to the Hollywood suburb of Bel Air, Bressane and Sganzerla's short-lived production company ("a wind blowing from an imagined cinematographic land") shared none of the plastic opulence of its nominal muse.

The films Bressane made with Belair crystallized the creative imprudence pulsing at the core of his cinema; more than a project, Belair was a recrudescence of his artistic subconscious. *The Abominable Barão Olavo* (*Barão Olavo, o horrível*) and *The Family of Chaos* (*A família do barulho*), both made in a matter of a few weeks in early 1970, are hysterical howls, dialogical ulcers in the bowels of cinema, experiments in self-negation and self-transformation. "In my films I've tried to irresponsibly let in everything I was being traversed by," said Bressane of those films, which perhaps accounts for why they quickly attracted the undesirable attention of the ruling military junta. Films that contained no nudity or anything straightforwardly obscene were censored. Why? The Belair films were accused of being part of an insurrectionary conspiracy linked to Brazil's public enemy number one, Marighella, one of the leaders of the urban guerrilla movement. Offering his father's testimony, which also disclosed the thoroughly legitimate origins of Belair's funds, in order to discredit such an



absurd claim, Bressane was nonetheless “kindly invited” out of Brazil. Stopping first in Paris (where he edited and mixed his third Belair film, *Cuidado Madame*), where the local film elite had strong ties with Glauber Rocha and the *Cinema Novistas*—from whose ranks Bressane and Sganzerla had been rancorously rejected—Bressane ended up in London. There, in the rootless haze of exile, the most invisible part of his career-less path began. From 1970 to 1988, Bressane’s films would not be shown in European festivals, and he would have to wait until 1981 for them to be shown again in Brazil.

In London, Bressane discovered lower temperatures, and with them a new perception of himself. Unlike most of his exiled compatriots (Caetano Veloso, Gilberto Gil, and others were in London at the same time), he liked the city immensely. He read voluminously—spending days on end in the British Museum—and after a year realized another film, *Memories of a London Strangler* (*Memórias de um Estrangulador de Louras*, 1971). (“I didn’t choose to make it, it happened to me,” said Bressane of his first film-in-exile.) Starring five extras lifted from Joseph Losey’s *The Go-Between* (1971), whose set Bressane had visited, *Memories* is a brutal hand-to-hand combat with narrative clichés and the self-regenerating myth of the strangler. A horror film impecuniously shot entirely outdoors, in broad daylight on deserted streets, *Memories* never found a distributor but was screened a few times at the Electric Cinema on Portobello Road.

“Starting with *Amor louco* [1971], I found myself making films that exceeded cinema, unthinkable films,” says Bressane of the period that followed, during which he undertook multiple trips to Morocco and stopped over in New York for almost a year in 1972, where he filmed *Lágrima pantera* (1972) in the loft of Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica, of the influential 1967

installation *Tropicália*. (*Lágrima pantera* would be seen for the first time in public at the Torino Film Festival’s Bressane retrospective in 2006; the material shot in Morocco was lost.) In Venice in 1973, Bressane and his partner met the marginal Brazilian director Andrea Tonacci (of the great and wild *Bang Bang*, 1970), and with him set out on a six-month car trip through Turkey, Afghanistan, India, and Nepal.

Upon his return to Brazil, he embarked on yet another journey—a cinematic one this time, into the viscera of his birthplace. If Bressane’s work in exile had been characterized by a stylistic dissection of genres, the films to come would anamorphize the synergic cultural matrix of his native land. His curiosity starved and perspective enhanced by a few years of exile, Bressane explored a new old history of Brazil in the lost film *Viagem através do Brasil—Nova história antiga do Brasil* (1973-75); this excursion into the unknown world of pre-Colombian, pre-colonized Brazil would fictionally coalesce in the as yet unseen *The Caribbean Monster* (*O monstro Caraíba*, 1975). (“Hubert Bals apparently really liked *O monstro Caraíba*, but he must have been the only one because I’ve never heard anyone else’s opinion,” said Bressane. “No one ever made a film about Brazilian prehistory; in *O monstro* this clandestine presence of the Brazilian past is strongly felt.”)

*O rei do baralho* (1973) followed, sketching an iconographic, Beckettian parody of the *chanchada*, a popular genre of Brazilian comedies. But it was in *The Agony* (*A agonia*, 1976) that Bressane came to terms with the experimental roots of his national cinema. Paying insolvent homage to Lang’s *M* (1931) but, most importantly, to Brazilian filmmaker Mario Peixoto’s silent, 1931 avant-garde feature *Limite* (which Bressane voraciously cannibalizes), *The Agony* is a desolate, minimalist road movie about a murderer on the run who picks up a fortune

teller. It follows their aimless trajectory as they find mutual torment instead of love, fight to and beyond the limit, and find shelter in a countryside mansion, where the fortune teller is attacked by a pirate. The film terminates with a pair of white trousers running into the night illuminated by car lights on the lost highways of Brazil. The film doesn't actually end, as a final intertitle points out; it interrupts itself.

After metabolizing his (return to) Brazil, Bressane kept making films, or rather phantom films, some of which have been seen by only a few individuals. Among these invisible hosts is *Chinese Viola—My Encounter with Brazilian Cinema* (*Viola Chinesa—Meu encontro com o cinema Brasileiro*, 1975), whose trailer at some point aired in the dead of night on Italian state television (now available on YouTube). Here, in what he claims to be the last Belair film, we come hilariously close to what may be considered Bressane's unreasonable, celluloid testament:

*The important in art is to express yourself. That which you express has no importance...Art is the imitation of a natural process, not a copy of it. Art is abnormality, deformation. Art is conflict; therefore cinema is erotic. All I've done in cinema was to have fun, to have and give pleasure, but also satisfy a voracious appetite for obstacles. To create, like reading, is a military operation...Cinema is the art of the future and of dreams; s/he who dreams the most will make the best cinema...So far my cinematic trajectory has constituted itself in the removal of an ancestral intuition. I, Júlio Bressane, all the epochs in my brain, salute all Brazilian filmmakers of all races.*

In this respect, the filmography of Júlio Bressane resembles the bottomless pit of cinema itself, whose many as yet uncatalogued species continue to ambush the diligent professors that redact its history. If academia condemns the innocence of cinema to the injustice of "serious" culture, defiant images will always resist taxonomization. In *Cinema inocente* (1980), Bressane penetrates the Magnus Filmes studios to discuss with *pornochanchada* (Brazilian pornographic comedies) editor Radar the candid perversions of cinema. Intercutting scenes from *pornochanchada* with early silent footage of beheadings, Bressane posits the former as the last haven of cinematic innocence. The syphilitic love for movies is laid bare in these 40 minutes of smutty meta-cinema; *Cinema inocente* is a corporeal embrace of cinema, a hymn to its tactile pleasures and sexually transmissible effusions.

In 1982, Bressane finally returned to a Brazilian film festival with *Tabu*. This film also marked the beginning of a productive new phase for Bressane, in which he actually started to receive funds for his films such as *Brás Cubas* (1985), *Sermoes—A História de Antonio Vieira* (1989), and *O Mandarim* (1995)—some of which even received theatrical distribution. The 21st century is saluted by (the) last days of Nietzsche in Turin (*Dias de Nietzsche em Turim*, 2001), where the director enacts the German philosopher's departure from the rational world. A year later, *Filme de amor* (2002) takes off on the waxwings of

mankind's most unreasonable feeling, love, and pans over its carnal joys and mental complications.

After the aforementioned Torino retrospective, Bressane's work enjoyed a sort of renaissance, whereby his audience has rocketed from an average of five spectators per screening to maybe 20. In 2012 *Rua Aperana 52*, a walk down memory lane through a recurring street/location of his films, premiered in Rotterdam, and *The Drumming Beat of Stars (O batuque dos astros)* in Rome; and, this year, Bressane's latest film *Sentimental Education (Educação sentimental)* was selected for the official competition at Locarno. At a time when even the combinations of love are susceptible to the vile tantrums of markets, Bressane has made a film about their indomitable thrust and irrational criteria. The film details, but most audaciously conveys, the hypnotic sexual tension between a young man and an older woman, his unripe silence measured against the sensual confidence of the mature woman, whose body is devoid of that anxious streak often found in the flesh of young beauty. The boy, tacitly dealing with his hard-on, listens to the story of the woman's life while admiring her understated sensuality, on the constant verge of explosion. "The tyranny of economic policy has hardened men's hearts, there is no longer a place for sensitivity," muses the woman; "Today, obscenity is sensitivity." Spying on the mystery of attraction, Bressane's film unmasks itself by trying to stage the least explicable of all urges, exorcising at the same time the castrating shadow of morality. In *Sentimental Education*, as in Bressane's other films, experimentation is not a conceptual exercise but the necessity of going along with physical needs, to take away expression from the limitation of a codified alphabet.

While the director can control the camera movements and orchestrate the acting, the fruition of films is an intangible dominion. It is within that sphere that Bressane exerts his primeval and savage craft, which passes through the eyes but aims at the neuralgic centres of sexuality, affectivity, and knowledge. As in Oswald de Andrade's 1928 *Anthropophagic Manifesto*, native cultures meet continental philosophy, popular cinema appropriates the avant-garde, poetry is vomited instead of recited. In Bressane's films the camera often turns on itself 360 degrees, as if seeking the bond between the cinema and its terrestrial dimension. What all of Bressane's films have in common is not a style or a thematic concern, but a stubborn determination to blank out the consequential logic that the very making of a film implies, so as to reclaim the instinctual impetus of a vision. Bressane is a filmmaker who keeps producing a decidedly "devious" cinema that nonetheless possesses a seductive, primitive magnetism entirely removed from the criminal formalism of "good taste." With the tools of an occidental (accidental?) invention, Bressane has tried to exhume the repressed corpse of expression, that forgotten art (pre-)history whose aboriginal force pulses through his films—a force that, once again in *Sentimental Education*, unhinges our leanings and predispositions to free us from the intellectual burden of reason and invite us to an exuberant contemplation.



The Dance of Reality

# A LIAR'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY

*The Return of Alejandro Jodorowsky*

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BY QUINTÍN

More than 800,000 people follow Alejandro Jodorowsky on Twitter. Every day these lucky people get a couple of dozen pearls of wisdom (in Spanish) such as, "If you hate walls, you should learn to build doors," or "The Visible longs for the Invisible, the Invisible longs for the Visible. You are also what you aren't," or even "Don't clean your ass before shitting." Born in northern Chile in 1929, Jodorowsky fled the country in 1954

to Paris where he became a French citizen, and also a writer, a psychoanalyst, a visual and mime artist, a guru, an actor, a magician, a Tarot expert, a comic-book writer...not to mention a charlatan. Jodorowsky is too much of everything.

And then, he is also a filmmaker. Jodorowsky gained his fame in the early '70s with two surrealistic works, *El Topo* (1970) and *The Holy Mountain* (1973). Shot in Mexico, those films dealt with gods, revolution, sex, violence, and other Big Issues. They made money in Europe and became cult movies, staples of the midnight-movie circuit during the era. But even people who watched them and liked them years ago are not quite sure whether they were really works of art, or just



right: *Jodorowsky's Dune*

far right: *The Dance of Reality*

something daring, original, visually powerful and yet childish and pompous. That being my attitude, and not having heard about Jodorowsky in years—he's not hiding or anything, it's my fault—I suddenly learned that he has made a new feature, his first since *The Rainbow Thief* (1990), and also that there is a new documentary made about him, and that both were shown in the Director's Fortnight in Cannes this year.

*Jodorowsky's Dune*, directed by Frank Pavich, is a straightforward documentary consisting of interviews about the non-making of Jodorowsky's biggest project, the filmic version of Frank Herbert's then famous sci-fi saga (actually, he only adapted the first volume), which is maybe one of the most boring books in the history of literature. It indeed was a failure, but an honourable one: Jodorowsky managed to assemble a huge and detailed collection of storyboards with the help of French *bande dessinée* artist Moebius, brought Dan O'Bannon, Chris Foss and H.R. Giger on board, secured music by Pink Floyd and get commitments to act in the film from Salvador Dalí, Orson Welles, and Mick Jagger, yet Jodorowsky and producer Michel Seydoux failed to finance the script in Hollywood.

Jodorowsky appears throughout the documentary, speaking in Spanish and, for no apparent reason, in maybe the worst English uttered on screen since Tarzan. In spite of being in excess of 80 years old, Jodorowsky looks in great shape; he's funny and histrionic. The guy takes great pleasure telling how he managed to seduce all those big names, and there are two moments that are particularly hilarious: when he reveals that he chose to make *Dune* without having read the book, solely because a friend told him it was great; and when he confesses

how happy he was when David Lynch's 1984 version of *Dune* turned out to be a massive flop. Of course, he is less convincing when he tries to persuade the camera that his *Dune* was the greatest thing on Earth, not an adaptation from Herbert but an autonomous piece about the coming of a Messiah, the rebirth of the Earth as living entity, and so forth. The presence in the documentary of Nicolas Winding Refn as a close friend and disciple doesn't help very much, and reinforces the feeling that Jodorowsky is kind of a con man, that everything he says is informed by astuteness, opportunism, and self-promotion. Even so, he is not an unsympathetic character: his vitality and sense of humour are contagious. And in any case, his megalomania is absolutely harmless.

So after getting back in touch with the man through the documentary, I felt ready to watch the artist perform as a filmmaker (also as an actor, producer, writer and set designer) in *The Dance of Reality* (*La danza de la realidad*), shot in his native village Tocopilla in Chile and based on the eponymous book that makes up the first part of his autobiography, which he calls "imaginary but not fictitious."

And then, to my surprise, I found that the film is great. And that Jodorowsky may be a false prophet, but he is a true filmmaker, one who explores the medium with absolute freedom and commitment. In *The Dance of Reality*, Jodorowsky plays himself as a ghost, while his son Brontis (who played a child in *El Topo*) plays his father Jaime. There are two stories in the movie, one about the coming-of-age of a child (based on Jodorowsky himself), the other about his crazy father, a Jewish communist who owns a lingerie shop and



whose cruelty towards his son reflects the cruelty of society around him—a society characterized by misery, ignorance, anti-Semitism, homophobia, and violence under the military dictatorship of General Carlos Ibáñez. (Although it must be said that the chronology doesn't exactly match up with the dates of Jodorowsky's actual life.)

Each scene is a new discovery, a tour de force where something is invented and nothing is flat. Jodorowsky creates his own world with endless imagination: he comes up with crazy allegories, powerful parables, and a level of emotion, suffering, and joy very uncommon in contemporary cinema. Every detail is splendid, from the reconstruction of the village (where people are seen wearing masks and a dwarf advertises his wares in front of his shop) to the love stories of Jaime with the hunchback woman or the President's horse. Jodorowsky's taste for the theatrical and the extreme makes him close to Browning or Fellini, and maybe also to Syberberg, but his irony reminds me of Buñuel and even Ruiz, with whom he shares a vision of the sea and the experience of the Chilean provinces as a child. But I can't remember a female character comparable to that of the mother, played by the extraordinary Pamela Flores, an enormous woman in every sense of the word, whose parts are entirely sung and whose naked body is just as much an anchor for the film as it is for her family.

Jodorowsky's artistic output has to do with healing and with family, while his art and philosophy are based around the idea of the *cure*. His oeuvre tries to find out how to grow, how to live, how to love, how to educate oneself and others in order to close the wounds that birth and society leave in the soul. But

this soul is in part a collective issue: parents are the children of their sons, and blood links make individuals part of other individuals. But also, they are thrown into history, thirsty for a relief that they can't find in ideology or religion, wealth or power. Jodorowsky, the guru filmmaker, has an answer for that suffering, even as he himself experiences the core of universal pain through his father, whose soul is attached to the sources of violence, and whose need for love and redemption is so massive.

Brontis Jodorowsky plays both Jaime Jodorowsky as well as President Ibáñez, who is the object of his hate and whom he tries to assassinate; but both also bear a striking resemblance to the picture of Stalin that hangs on the wall in Jaime's shop. *The Dance of Reality* works as an exorcism of an era where false and destructive dreams were also the hope for mankind, and when children were educated through abuse by their parents and by society. But Jodorowsky, one of these abused children, finally became as brave as young Alex is told to be in the film: he dares in his film to take on all of those issues, to speak freely about love and sex, fascism and communism and sorrow and pain and happiness, and to make his personal circus travel the world with brilliance. All he needs is some money, the money that he couldn't raise for *Dune*. *The Dance of Reality* starts with Jodorowsky invoking the dance of money, and by the end of the film you can tell that his trick as a magician consists in making money dance for him, while pretending that he dances for the money. Even in that department, Jodorowsky is the biggest truth-teller among the liars.

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# SUNNY PLEASURE DOMES WITH CAVES OF ICE

*Politics and the Asian Blockbuster*

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BY TONY RAYNS

The editor asked for something about Bong Joonho's *Snowpiercer*, and we'll get to that, but let's start with Tsui Hark. Tsui made his first feature *The Butterfly Murders* (1979) nearly three-and-a-half decades ago, so it's understandable that people have largely forgotten how radical he once was. Tsui himself was always more a movie brat than a political

subversive, but his circle of close friends in Hong Kong in the mid-'70s included several semi-reconstructed Maoists, some of whom contributed without credit to the scripts of his first three features.

When Tsui and others moved en masse from television to film in 1979-80, there was immediate talk of a "Hong Kong new wave." It was actually more of a seismic shift in the management and policies of the film industry than a creative break with the *cinéma de papa*, and very few of the early "new wave" films are still seen or talked about now. Most are not even on DVD. At the time, though, the movement had the fringe ben-

*Detective Dee: The Mystery of the Phantom Flame*

efit of bringing images of contemporary Hong Kong (and the sound of its Cantonese language) into real prominence for the first time in a local film culture that had been dominated for decades by Shanghai Chinese émigrés who made studio-bound films in Mandarin.

Ann Hui started out excavating local scandals and superstitions, Allen Fong started out as Hong Kong's answer to Ken Loach, Alex Cheung started out as Hong Kong's would-be Spielberg...and Tsui Hark started out with a revisionist *wuxia* movie, a black comedy about cannibalism, and an ultra-violent, ultra-xenophobic urban thriller. That third film, variously known as *Dangerous Encounters - First Kind* and *Don't Play With Fire* (1980), featured disaffected public-housing estate kids who leave homemade bombs in public places, a dissolute cop, and brutal western arms dealers who use Hong Kong as a warehouse for their stock. The British colonial censor banned it, and it wasn't released until half an hour of it had been reshot and a competent police presence had been added to the plot. (There's a DVD edition that restores the original banned version alongside the release version—published, of course, in France.) Tsui's two previous features were also deliberately provocative. *The Butterfly Murders* was not only revisionist *wuxia* but also cautionary sci-fi (it predicts the invention of the machine gun: "political power grows out of the barrel of a gun") and *We're Going to Eat You* (1980), although it's something of a misfire, offers a not-very-oblique political satire of the Cultural Revolution.

The point about dredging up this history is to remind ourselves that East Asian directors of pop-genre fiction once took political questions in their stride. The obvious precedent was what happened in the Japanese film industry in the '30s: when the increasingly militarist government banned *keikō-eiga* (Marxism-influenced "tendency films"), the leftist current in Japanese film culture, nurtured by the proletarian literature movement of the '20s, moved into swordplay movies. The newly politicized genre gave us one master, Yamanaka Sadao, who worked with members of the communist theatre group Zenshin-za, but we shouldn't forget either the contributions of Yamanaka's mentors, Ito Daisuke and Makino Masahiro. Their work in the '30s cleared the space for the politically aware genre movies of the post-war years: Kurosawa's challenges to Japan's class structure, Shin Sangok's attacks on bad Korean government, King Hu's highly entertaining lessons in teamwork, ethnic diversity, and female strength. And those are just auteur examples.

No East Asian filmmaker working in a studio system was ever as politically gutsy as, say, Sam Fuller in his heyday—although it's notable that Fuller effectively became a proto-independent in the Hollywood of the '50s. But the political awareness that's visible in Tsui Hark's early films—particularly in their assumptions about class and their desire to provoke anger and/or outrage—reflected not only his own background in community activism (New York Chinatown, after graduating from the University of Texas), but also the inherited conviction that politics have as much place in genre movies as they do in town hall.

Tsui Hark famously scaled back the political content of his work in the '80s, marking his transition to "family entertainment" by joining Cinema City, the least impressive "major" in Hong Kong, and making a dismal farce called *All the Wrong Clues (for the Right Solution)* (1981). I realize that the last thing this magazine needs is another writer who thinks that his own experiences are at least as interesting as any film, but I feel duty-bound to record that I was present at one of the turning-points. There was a symposium on the faltering "new wave" organised by the Hong Kong Film Culture Centre in, I think, 1982. The most forceful speaker was Mou Tunfei, who had fled Taiwan a decade earlier in protest against the suppression of two "progressive" indie features he'd made; he'd acquired some South American passport to facilitate his global wanderings and had lately berthed at Shaw Brothers, where he was making incredibly obnoxious exploitation movies. Mou was cynicism personified. He argued that there was no place for idealism in the film industry, and that making lowest-common-denominator movies was the best way forward. The only person present who was openly impressed by this was Tsui Hark.

Of course, there are flashes of the old agit-brio in later Tsui Hark films: *Working Class* (1985), *Peking Opera Blues* (1986), and *The Blade* (1995) all have their points, and the "apolitical" nationalism of the *Once Upon a Time in China* series is spiked with anti-colonial jibes. But Tsui's upcoming *Young Detective Dee: The Rise of the Sea Dragon* is his most overtly political



movie in a long while. Coming at a time when China's newly installed president Xi Jinping is bringing his sometime rival Bo Xilai to heel and struggling to legitimize the Communist Party's right to rule while (apparently) looking to introduce cautious democratic reforms, the film can almost be taken as a political intervention.

You perhaps missed Tsui's *Detective Dee: The Mystery of the Phantom Flame* (2010) a couple of years ago. It was a career-reviving hit, a big-budget CGI blockbuster financed by Huayi Brothers, China's most rapacious "major." It took a character retrieved from history by the Sinologist-diplomat Robert van Gulik, who wrote a series of "Judge Dee" novels, but bypassed the novels to create an original Tang Dynasty mystery for Dee to solve. It starred Andy Lau as Dee, featured a cameo by Carina Lau as the notorious Empress Wu, and relied heavily on visual effects. It was, in short, a film designed to meet Hollywood's current superhero franchises on their own terms. You can Google the box-office results if you care.

The new film is the prequel. Carina Lau returns as the Empress, but the financiers clearly felt no need to shell out for Andy Lau again—or for any other stars. The selling points are the spectacle, Tsui Hark's style, and the burgeoning franchise itself. It's set at a time of war between the Tang Dynasty and Fuyu (now known as Korea), but the real bad guys are terrorists from an island caught in the middle; their fishing industry has been decimated by the war.

The plot is of course a re-run of the previous film, this time with much of the action at sea, and it needn't detain us now. What's interesting is that Tsui and his writers have responded to the challenge of introducing Dee as a young man by giving him the mission of cleaning up the Da Lisi, the state's law-enforcement agency. It's taken as a given that the imperial court is an institution fuelled by privilege, nepotism, and preferment, and crammed with dithering old incompetents. Empress Wu and the Emperor she treats as a puppet are untouchably in charge, but the Da Lisi is in urgent need of reform and modernization. Dee gets the process started, and is awarded the "Dragon-taming Mace" for his efforts. In an extraordinary climactic speech, the Emperor hails Dee as the scourge of all evils and says that even he and his consort must be held to account. In its white-elephant way, Tsui's film argues for a credible rule of law as forcefully as Jia Zhangke's *A Touch of Sin* does.

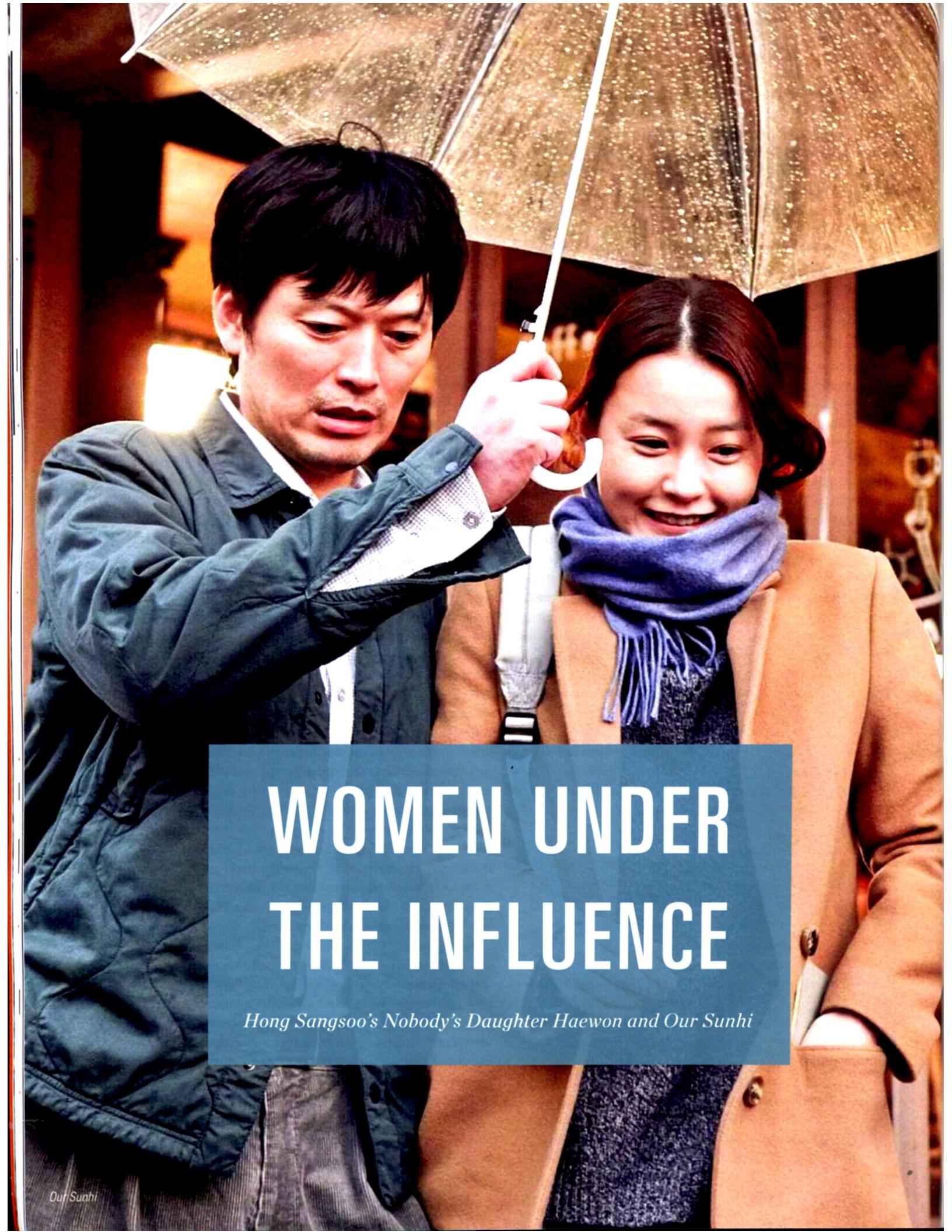
The law in Bong Joonho's *Snowpiercer* is Darwinian. The film is based on a French graphic novel, not yet published in translation, but Bong says that he's used only the central premises and made up the rest himself. The central premises are these: an international attempt to head off global warming has gone badly wrong and created a new ice age; sentient life on earth is extinguished; the one person who saw this coming is the American industrialist-engineer Wilford (Ed Harris), who has built a globe-circling rail track and a train (with a perpetual-motion engine) capable of piercing all encrustations of ice. Wilford sold places on the Snowpiercer to the wealthy, who enjoy all the comforts of their former lives as the train ploughs ever onward. But the last few carriages have been made available on a first-come-first-served basis to what train-leader

Mason (Tilda Swinton) calls "freeloaders," who subsist on synthetic food in squalid conditions. If this reminds you of long-haul flight, Bong is way ahead of you.

Naturally, the film is a parable of revolution. A long-gestating uprising, masterminded by elderly guru Gilliam (John Hurt), who was once Wilford's partner, starts with an overtly phallic thrust to the train's prison carriage, where the security designer (Song Kangho) is incarcerated, and then continues with a series of bloody skirmishes as Curtis (Chris Evans) and his lieutenant (Jamie Bell) push through the economy-class carriages towards First and a showdown with Wilford. No need for a spoiler alert because I'm not going to say any more about the plot, which is sprung on a series of surprises—including some surprise deaths. But I will say that the surprises pile up in the closing scenes, which challenge the politics of the revolution and defy expectation on many levels. Wilford, in particular, is not the kind of fat-cat ogre we may have imagined.

Of all East Asian cinemas, Korea's is the one most imbued with political awareness. It's not hard to see why. South Korea had spent most of its existence under military dictatorships until 20 years ago, and its current president is the daughter of one of the most notorious dictators; she appears to see it as part of her duty to vindicate her father's policies. An entire generation of students became activists in the wake of the 1980 massacre of civilians in Gwangju, a Korean foreshadowing of the Tiananmen Square massacre in Beijing nine years later. Bong Joonho was one of them, and from the very start (his 1994 graduation short *Incoherence*) his work has had a strong political dimension. *Memories of Murder* (2003) is rooted in the dark mood of the '80s, and ultimately blames the crimes on the society the Gwangju massacre created. *Barking Dogs Never Bite* (2000) is similarly rooted in the uncertainties and class divisions of the '90s. *The Host* (2006) targets American arrogance and Korean authoritarianism, seeing both as incompetent, and captures the underdog spirit of anti-government activists in one family's war on the monster—right down to the throwing of Molotov cocktails. *Mother* (2009) is all about challenging the "official" version of events.

The Korean audience is unfazed by the political content of its entertainments, but that may well be the element that most disturbs Harvey Weinstein about *Snowpiercer*. The Weinstein Company (TWC) has bought the film for six English-speaking territories, and has set about "revising" it to make it comprehensible—as one TWC staffer told Bong—to viewers in Iowa and Oklahoma. As Bong finished it, the film runs 125 minutes, including six minutes of end-credits. The TWC cut is 20 minutes shorter, and Weinstein has demanded opening and closing narrations to make everything clear to thickos. I haven't seen the TWC version, but Bong says the cuts have eliminated detail and character; TWC is evidently trying to turn the film into a conventional action-adventure. Even without seeing it, I'm sure they won't succeed. Twitter is already awash with calls from outraged Bong Joonho fans to boycott the US release; these will no doubt make Harvey Weinstein all the more intransigent. Welcome to Iowa, people.



# WOMEN UNDER THE INFLUENCE

*Hong Sangsoo's Nobody's Daughter Haewon and Our Sunhi*

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BY JORDAN CRONK

As an agent for acclimation, alcohol is one of our most proven resources. In the cinema of Hong Sangsoo, it's less a casual commodity than a conduit for conducive social interaction, a property of both emotionally collateral and physically direct engagement. The characters portrayed in the prolific South Korean auteur's work drink incessantly, to the point of excess and usually beyond, beer and soju bottles strewn geometrically across dining tables in an array of intuitive designs (and never further than arm's reach, of course). As befits a filmography featuring heavy drinkers, written and directed by a heavy drinker—Hong is known to encourage, shall we say, method acting as the occasion sees fit—Hong's narratives are often unpredictable proceedings, as restless or volatile as any given individual in the director's dilated purview. It's almost as if in Hong's universe, as opposed to (most of) our everyday lives, liquor itself is the constant and emotion is the variable, as likely to facilitate communication as it is to reduce the same to simply a series of loaded, unconscious mannerisms.

This unstable configuration of erratic characterizations grafted onto shape-shifting chronologies is what has kept Hong's approach fresh each time out, even as he has studiously avoided deviating from such a deceptively modest aesthetic model. If his work has felt at times more like variations on a very specific set of themes rather than a meditation on any sort of broad sociological issue(s), this has lent the whole of his corpus a consistently familiar, intimate sense of (dis)comfort. Just as each drink presents new visual, physical, and emotional obstacles for the imbiber to negotiate, so too does each new Hong film construct a set of thoroughly recognizable but novel interpersonal challenges for its characters to navigate, matters which can lead to confrontation, communion, or, best-case scenario, commitment.

Yet while Hong's recent fascination with female leads and a general (and likely temporary) shift toward a more deceptively linear storytelling mode might seem to signal a potential sea change in his methodology, his most recent efforts still play more as a concentration of his established thematic and conceptual concerns rather than a concerted shift in emphasis. It's thus that Hong's pair of 2013 world premieres, *Nobody's Daughter Haewon* and *Our Sunhi* (the former bowing in Berlin, the latter in Locarno), share more than calendar space. As per their respective titles, these female-focused fictions take a single principal protagonist as their subject, a centralized configuration that Hong has seemingly been working toward recently: both *Oki's Movie* (2010) and *In Another Country* (2012) featured women in the lead role, though in both cas-

es these characters worked more as catalysts for the greater deconstruction of the male sexual id than as true female portraiture. Furthermore, both those earlier films made a point to emphasize their structural ingenuity, a strategy which *Haewon* and *Sunhi* dispense with. Nevertheless, both establish internal patterns, recycle motifs (both visual and, surprisingly, auditory: each film features diegetic uses of music which work almost as theme songs), and feature a number of the same actors. If Hong does concern himself with one specific theme across these two films, it's our collective pursuit of an earnest and engaged emotional understanding—or, as one character in *Our Sunhi* rather bluntly proclaims, "Sooner strangle an infant in his cradle than nurse un-acted love."

Refreshingly streamlined, both *Haewon* and *Sunhi* proceed without concession to a larger conceptual schema (though *Haewon* does employ first-person, diary-like narration and elliptical dream sequences, these are mostly a means of contextualization). Rather than push the meta machinations of *Oki's Movie*, the near-phenomenological revisionisms of *The Day He Arrives* (2011), or the comedic triangulation of *In Another Country* even further, Hong instead opts to let these films breathe simply by observing his central characters as they navigate the waters of collegiate-age romance and regret. Hong sets both stories in motion in a notably similar fashion: in short order, both of Hong's heroines unexpectedly cross paths with mysterious figures—a vacationing celebrity (Jane Birkin, playing herself) in *Haewon* and a stylish, chain-smoking potential suitor in *Sunhi*—who, never to be seen again, inadvertently motivate each protagonist to act upon dormant feelings. This, of course, inevitably leads both ladies back to the comforts of the bottle, adding another soused and besotted duo to Hong's growing gallery of disenchanted, self-destructive protagonists.

Of the two ladies, Haewon (Jeong Eunchae) is the more reckless and indulgent. After her brief encounter with Birkin and a subsequent exchange outside a café with a young man, which her mother facilitates and encourages her to build upon, Haewon contacts her ex-boyfriend, a professor named Seongjun (Lee Seongyun), out of both loneliness and convenience. The two meet, drink, and attempt to duck his former students, only to end up seated in a restaurant surrounded by these very same people for another of Hong's expertly written, uncomfortably candid conversation scenes. Seongjun, now married and a part-time film director (Hong's most commonly assigned vocation, prompting an easy correlation between himself and his male characters), is questioned incessantly as the group eats and drinks and drinks some more, and is put on the spot about everything from his profession to his break-up with Haewon to the effect their relationship (once a teacher/student controversy) has had on their group dynamic. Whether roused by Haewon's invite or persuaded by guilt, Seongjun soon begins his romantic pursuit of Haewon again,

losing sight, as Hong characters tend to do, of everyday obligations and commitments.

For her part, Sunhi (Yumi Jeong, who also played the title character in *Oki's Movie*) as well is an incessant object of desire for the men in her life, and in the plural lies the problem: there are, in fact, three men. Following a confrontation with a classmate and a resulting conversation with Professor Choi (Kim Sangjung), a former teacher whose advances she entertains in an effort to procure a recommendation letter, Sunhi, like Haewon before her, proceeds to get drunk with her ex-boyfriend, Munsu (also a filmmaker, and also played by Lee Seongyun), who appears desperate to win back her affection. Further complicating matters is the fact that these two men know each other, just as they know Jaehak (Jeong Jaeyeong), a slightly older and established director who quietly pines for Sunhi despite offering romantic advice to Munsu. What transpires is a dark comedy of errors and miscommunication, each character appearing to seek the same sort of intense connection, yet, in their own individual ways, failing to properly articulate as much. Case in point: a piece of advice offered by Choi in the aforementioned scene keeps cropping up in different iterations throughout the film, like a game of broken telephone gone horribly awry.

Though the films' relative absence of any greater structural conceit might provide a handy excuse for a lack of formal commitment, *Haewon* and *Sunhi* are instead two of Hong's most aesthetically compelling films to date. Excepting perhaps his work in black and white, *Nobody's Daughter Haewon* may be the most purely beautiful achievement of Hong's career; a mid-film transition from the Seoul city centre to the remote mountain locale of Namhan Fortress inspires a series of stunning compositions, one of which, framed from behind his actors and overlooking a canyon with wind-blown flags positioned at either end, is so breathtaking that Hong even returns to it a second time to bask in its glow. The film's shift to this moodier, expressive expanse seems to mirror Haewon's reconciliation with her feelings—not for nothing does an early scene linger as Haewon joyously dances her way across a sparsely populated park, a rare occasion for this woman to express a sense of freedom, even in her confusion, that she can't seem to replicate in the company of men. In this sense, Hong's antiquated employment of the zoom lens weighs heavier here than usual: throughout the film, we, like Seongjun, are attempting to get closer to Haewon, even as she pushes against our advances. As the film's title implies, this may very well be futile pursuit, but rarely in Hong has the struggle proven so rewarding.

Perhaps Hong's most rigorously composed work, *Our Sunhi* consists largely of lengthy, static two-shots wherein characters psychologically purge to the point of discomfort, forcing one to confront these contradictory personalities head on. (Hong has never been one for cross-cutting, but even so, a handful of scenes here run close to ten minutes in length; an early scene between Munsu and Jaehak approaches 12.) In another bit of symmetry with *Haewon*, the claustrophobic interiors of *Sunhi's* first two acts eventually give way to a concluding sequence set outdoors. With the coordinates of this love quad-

rangle charted and seemingly set (Jaehak is the only one of the three men whom Sunhi seems willing to romantically respond to), this final flourish at Changgyeong Palace, a sort of open-air oasis, plays like a breath of literal and figurative fresh air. By systematically bringing all the characters together via a series of deferent cellphone calls, with the three men eventually meeting in an awkward convergence as Sunhi exits the scene, Hong neatly upends the preceding 85 minutes, transforming a previously draining relationship drama into an ironic comedy of coincidence.

With his penchant for modest, character-oriented narratives, deceptively elemental compositional sense, consistent desire to till similar thematic soil and, lest we forget, employment of booze as situational utility, Hong has understandably been tagged with Ozu comparisons throughout his career. But a more appropriate parallel, particularly in regard to Hong's recent work, may be Eric Rohmer. Both *Haewon* and *Sunhi* are, in a sense, moral tales, aligning them with the *nouvelle vague* iconoclast's famous sextet. However, with their emphasis on seasonal dramaturgy—the wintry, snowcapped plazas of *The Day He Arrives*, the day-glo, ocean-side summer retreats of *In Another Country*, the pointedly (and poignantly) autumnal sheen of *Haewon* and *Sunhi*—and concern with matters of the heart, Hong's last few films feel of even greater spiritual accord with Rohmer's triumphant late-career compendium *Contes des quatre saisons* (1990-1998). It may be reaching to assign conceptual divinations to a career as consistent as Hong's, particularly since his work has often betrayed an awareness of such seemingly inconsequential things as seasonal setting (see, for example, *Woman on the Beach* [2006]), but his recent output, no matter Hong's carefully calibrated subtlety, nonetheless assumes a more imposing stature when considered of a piece.

It's perhaps telling that this Rohmeresque group identity among Hong's recent works has emerged as he has gradually gravitated away from a male perspective. With few exceptions, the men in Hong's work tend to be interchangeable—14 films in 17 years will have that effect, and it's arguably the intended effect anyway (repetition being a primary Hong concern, from characterization to textual exposition to, finally, visualization). What's fascinating, then, is that his current curiosity with women has resulted in some of the most uniquely passionate, indefatigable females in contemporary cinema. Oki, Isabelle Huppert's nonchalantly amorous vacationer from *In Another Country*, and now *Haewon* and *Sunhi*: four utterly distinct, at times contradictory, but altogether vivid women seeking affection from men but who are in no way beholden to their physical or intellectual whims ("I don't need to date men," Sunhi confidently repeats more than once). Haewon, an unapologetic dreamer, will persevere despite her vulnerability; likewise, Sunhi, a girl prone to "disappearing for years," seems, by the conclusion of her narrative, to be all set to move on to the next stage of her life, with or without these men. "Women shouldn't be held back," Jaehak explains to a distraught Munsu in an early scene in *Our Sunhi*. Thankfully Hong, chronicler of all things better left unspoken, doesn't seem interested in doing anything of the sort.



Walker

# MASTER SHOTS

*Tsai Ming-liang's Late Digital Period*

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BY BLAKE WILLIAMS

The title of Tsai Ming-liang's tenth feature, *Stray Dogs*, bears a fairly conspicuous resemblance to a key metaphor from Laozi's 6th-century Chinese philosophical text *Tao Te Ching*, which allegorizes man's relationship with the heavens as that of a straw dog and the one who created it. Literally a dog-shaped figure made out of straw, these forms were designed to survive a ritualistic utility in an ancient Chinese tradition: highly revered until the completion of the ceremony they were made for, they are then indifferently discarded and forgotten, having been neither loved nor hated. ("Heaven and Earth are heartless, treating creatures like straw dogs.") Straw dogs and stray dogs, thus, are very similar things, emotionally: they are disposed goods, pitiable and sullied, relegated and prevented from fulfilling a greater potential. Tsai's evocation of this metaphor is more political than metaphysical, and the film is

unusual in this regard (Tsai's films have never left their political subtext this close to the surface). Known for his musical numbers, the only song in *Stray Dogs* is delivered bitterly by Tsai's muse Lee Kang-sheng as he holds up a real estate placard under a highway: "My exploits are naught but mud and dust... When will the grief of the Empire's subjects end?" Presented with a hefty dose of defeatism, bodies are, once again, Tsai's paramount preoccupation, and while his inquiries have always revolved around confrontations with spatial disturbances and breaches in privacy, lately he's beginning to place a more concentrated emphasis on their relationship with time.

In approaching how time is dealt with not only in *Stray Dogs*—Tsai's first feature since *Visage* (2009)—but also the three shorts he made in the interim (*Madame Butterfly* [2009] *Walker*, and *No Form* [both 2012]), it's essential to consider these films in light of his conversion to digital filmmaking. Known for his static, minutes-long master shots, Tsai's notoriously hands-off découpage has been in a state of flux for the last decade. *Good Bye, Dragon Inn* (2003) was his most aus-

ter exercise in long takes up to that point; its successor, *The Wayward Cloud* (2005), felt like Eisenstein in comparison, featuring individual scenes that were fragmented into up to four or five different camera angles. *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone* (2006) did little to develop Tsai's formal vocabulary, but *Visage* suggested a new, rigorous venture into unedited studies of performative acts. His last film made on 35mm, *Visage* can in retrospect be seen as a trial run for the direction he would take in his further explorations of digital temporality: shots of Laetitia Casta blacking out windows with tape and construction paper stretched upwards of five minutes, and an uncut scene of Jean-Pierre Léaud in front of a rehearsal room mirror ran eight-and-a-half minutes. Made the same year, the digitally shot, 35-minute *Madame Butterfly* contains only three shots—two of which are approximately 15 minutes long—while *Stray Dogs*, his first feature-length digital work, incorporates shots of 11 and 14 minutes (not to mention eight other takes that go on for at least three minutes apiece).

For structural filmmakers (and fans of their work), this ought to come as no surprise. As we've observed in the last decade, to go digital is to go long: James Benning's shots jumped from three- to ten-minute durations to hour-length as soon as he abandoned celluloid with *Ruhr* (2009), and he has since broken the 90-minute barrier with his single-take, day-turns-to-night experience *Nightfall* (2011); Ernie Gehr left his camera rolling in front of some sunsets to produce his contemplative, three-shot, 39-minute *Waterfront Follies* (2009); and then there's Abbas Kiarostami, who one might have mistaken for a structural filmmaker if one's first exposure to his work had been the five-shot, 74-minute *Five Dedicated to Ozu* (2003), the third and most challenging digital project in a decidedly "experimental" ten-year period. What's perhaps most fascinating about this pattern is that these artists aren't stretching things out for the sake of Bazinian realness: in these three examples, and now for Tsai as well, the long take is employed to achieve a sort of hypnosis, sobering the mind so that it might be more susceptible to the sublime.

Tsai, however, is not a structural filmmaker. The few formal tendencies he exhibits that could be linked to that movement (long takes, fixed frames) could just as readily be traced to his New Wave idols of the '60s. His films still are, after all, character-driven narratives, however sparse and elliptical those narratives may be; they're just as distinctive for their depictions of bodies and mobility, space and place, and alienating urbanization as they are for their omission of montage. Take, for instance, a scene that could be called *Stray Dogs'* centrepiece. Captured entirely in an uncut medium shot, Lee Kang-sheng joins his already-sleeping son and daughter in their makeshift bed positioned beside two bowls catching drips from the leaky ceiling. Once settled into a supine position, he turns to face a third figure resting on the pillow next to him—not another person, but a head of cabbage with a lipstick-drawn mouth and eyes, placed atop an overstuffed sweater (the children named it "Miss Big Boobs"). After lethargically acknowledging the cruciferous scarecrow, Lee spontaneously becomes spooked by it, hastily smothers it with his pillow, and then proceeds to eat—and

partially regurgitate—the leafy head before finally bursting into howling sobs.

This nearly 11-minute scene is a quintessential Tsai set piece, demonstrating his proclivity for dropping an isolated micro-narrative into his broader structure without regard for literal connectivity to the scenes around it. A prelude to the film's nightmarish final act, it's a scene that actually may only exist to serve as an antithesis to the rest of the film's dramatic strategy, being one of only a few instances in *Stray Dogs* that incorporates a significant (i.e., non-mundane) action into its confined stasis. The behaviour of Tsai's characters in this film could most accurately be described as mannequin-esque: their bodies (Lee's in particular) get caught in poses that only permit basic motions such as combing hair, raising food to the mouth, pissing, lying in a bed or a bathtub, holding up a large advertising placard, or looking at a mural.

Tsai's *mise en scène* has become increasingly indistinguishable from the vernacular of performance art: the emphasis he places on his characters' bodies, their placement and function in space, and the depiction of a gesture or task from beginning to end are all hallmarks of the Conceptualist tradition. One can see the connections further when looking at early '60s and '70s video artists (many of whom were essentially performance artists who saw video as a documentary tool), namely Bruce Nauman's studio performances, Vito Acconci's bodily/spatial interventions, and Shigeko Kubota's recurring attention to water (especially rain and rivers). To varying degrees, these three artists can all be tied to the Fluxus movement, which makes for an even deeper reference point in mining Tsai's recent stylistic and aesthetic methods. In particular, certain Zen philosophies promoted in the work of John Cage and the fellow Fluxists he influenced (e.g., Yoko Ono) are most definitely discernible in late Tsai. They're made explicitly apparent in *Walker*, in which Lee, dressed as a monk and carrying a plastic bag holding unseen objects in one hand and a wrapped sandwich in the other, walks through Hong Kong in super-slow motion, the bustle of the city flowing around him. The piece moves from day to night twice over the course of its brief running time, the walker's barely visible visage bowed to the ground at all times to suggest his enduring devotion. With an average shot length of 68 seconds, *Walker* intends to hone our attention toward the physical endurance required of Lee (the actor) in performing this act, the absurdity of his motions reaching its zenith when he takes a long, drawn-out bite of his sandwich. This is the paradox of this work: the piece promotes a meditative response, yet it's also intrinsically hilarious. (Fluxists considered humour to be an essential element in their performances.)

This Zen sensibility is even more present, albeit with much less humour, in *Stray Dogs*. Take the final scene of the film, which lasts 20 minutes and depicts little more than two characters standing still in a room staring at a mural. The drawing, made by artist Gao Jun Hong, depicts a rocky landscape, and seems to strike awe into those who stand before it, inducing a suspended state of reverie. The scene, composed of two shots, begins with a camera track that meets Lee and Chen Shiang-chyi in the middle of the room, reminiscent of the slow glide up to the vacuum in the climactic scene of Apichatpong



Stray Dogs

Weerasethakul's Buddhist *Syndromes and a Century* (2006). From the moment the camera parks into a medium close-up framing of Lee and Chen until the next cut more than 13 minutes later, there is minimal movement or variance of expression; the most momentous event is a tear that trickles out of Chen's right eye, creating a trail that never quite reaches her jaw line, drying and disappearing over the course of the single take. (Given Chen's attempt just a few scenes earlier to personify Lee's decaying house—she described the leaky domain as old, wrinkled, and filled with tears—one draws a metaphorical connection between her body and Lee's home, an association Tsai has made before in *The Hole* [1998] and *What Time Is It There?* [2001].) In the background, a train passes by—twice—to momentarily reactivate the frame, and our consciousness.

It's pertinent to recall here that Tsai's earliest creative work was not in cinema or television, but experimental theatre. His few plays—all made while he was a student—exhibit the roots of his cinematic practice. In *A Sealed Door in the Dark* (1983), two inmates kept in the same prison cell engage in a territorial rivalry when one of them steals the others' clothes, and in *The Closet in the Room* (1984), a writer works on a new script in his tiny bedroom, experiencing a crisis after he discovers that a man has been living in his closet. There's an undeniably absurd, Beckettian quality to these scenarios, exhibiting the same minimalist approach that dominated the Irish play-

wright's late period, typically evoked through small spaces, confined bodies, blankets of darkness, and abstruse concepts: *Breath* (1969), perhaps Beckett's most notorious late-career work—consisting entirely of the sound of a long inhalation and exhalation, a light that fades in and dims out in coordination with the swelling lungs, bookended by piercing birth cries—lasts only 25 seconds.

For the unsuspecting theatregoer, this piece is most memorable not for its thematics, but its brevity; it's an audaciously stunted approach to theatre that subverts our expectations of durational media. The same applies to Tsai's digital master shots, though with a significantly inverted effect. He isn't limited by the relatively diminutive allowances of film reels, and this represents not only a tremendously liberating breakthrough for how Lee and co. spend their time in front of the camera, but also a profound shift in audience expectations of narrative flow. Never threatening to run too short, his scenes could just keep going, running as long as a hard disk will allow, stretching out into oblivion. On more than one occasion (especially in *Stray Dogs'* later scenes) that idea begins to feel like a legitimate possibility. Then Chen's eye will blink, or Lee's neck muscle will twitch, and we're reminded that the fundamental physicality of human performance won't allow it. The camera could keep recording, but eventually the bodies of the actors will fatigue, and the walls decay around them.

# PILGRIM'S PROGRESS

*Manakamana*



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*"Pilgrimage is premised on the idea that the sacred is not entirely immaterial, but that there is a geography of spiritual power. Pilgrimage walks a delicate line between the spiritual and the material in its emphasis on the story and its setting: though the search is for spirituality, it is pursued in terms of the most material details..."*

—Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*

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BY JAY KUEHNER

Of the few material offerings appropriate for pilgrims who worship the Hindu goddess Bhagwati at Manakamana temple in Nepal—among them coconuts, sacred thread, saffron extract, flowers, red cloth, rice, and incense—a movie camera may not be deemed particularly auspicious for the sake of worship or sacrifice. But as a means of recording those pilgrims who ascend by modern cable car, traversing 2,772.2 metres of the verdant Trisuli and Marshyang-di river valleys, the camera incidentally partakes of an essential fifth element of Hindu philosophy, that of *akasha*, or ether. Stephanie Spray and Pacho Velez's *Manakamana* is exclusively trained and sustained on the transient inhabitants,

some human, of these cable cars as they ascend to and descend from the ancient site, to little perceptible consequence. By virtue of its rigorous but playful structuring principle, however—in which what remains beyond the camera's purview bears immensely on what is on view, and in which banality is uncommonly dignified—the film levitates toward an epistemological consideration without ever leaving its seat. After watching *Manakamana*, one could be convinced that the one, eternal, all-pervading substance of *akasha* is nothing less than an ice cream bar, melting in the helpless hands of a Nepalese elder in her earthbound descent from funicular grace.



Upon first impression, as the car emerges from the dark void of the cable car station and the viewer is subsequently perched, by way of a fixed camera (incidentally, the same camera used by Robert Gardner for *Forest of Bliss* [1986], shot in Varanasi), before the inscrutable presence of an elder and child, it seems as if the film's formal conceit is taking us for a ride. Will the duration of the ascent unfold in real time, as we sit in awkward proximity to this silent couple (whom we can only assume are grandparent and grandchild) staring quizzically into the distant, unfolding landscape? And what exactly are the risks and rewards for the audience of sitting through the protracted passage, in which the cable car moves at 21.6 kilometres

per hour to its destination at an altitude of 1,302 metres in roughly the amount of time it takes for a 16mm magazine of film to roll out? Like the passengers before us, we can do little but marvel, yawn, or fidget our way through the enclosed space, breathe the available air, behold shifts of light, take in the sound of birdsong carved open by the pulse of electric cable. (The directors' collaboration with sound designer Ernst Karel, whose sonic explorations of mountain transport systems anticipate *Manakamana*, is integral to the film's applied acoustemology).

Upon closer inspection, and a relaxed sense of anticipation, what may feel like cinematic anathema (the terror of iner-



tia!) reveals itself as the blooming of awareness, of self and other, through an act of forbearance. As another field report from Harvard's Sensory Ethnography Lab—the visual anthropology department headed by Lucien Castaing-Taylor, co-director of *Sweetgrass* (2009) and *Leviathan* (2012)—*Manakamana* is predicated on close inspection, embodied inquiry, defiance of genre, and an engagement with the real. Accordingly, the film does not digress from its initial formal schema: what follows are 11 extended takes that document rides up and down the mountain, all seen from the same static, but incessantly moving, position within the car, each transitioned by a black-out naturally furnished by the interior of the station (the *mise en scène* naturally entails a variation on sculpting in time, sans the metaphysical underpinning). The only variation, of course, is the content: that introductory

duo is followed by a host of characters equally bound by time, the rectilinear dimensions of the cable car, and the camera's compositional frame.

Any fears of a lapse into a standard "ethnographic" style of filmmaking—colourful natives in their exotic land—are soon dispelled by the fact that all the various passengers who enter the cable car's micro-habitat are in some way estranged: from the land below from which they embarked; from the circumambulation of a traditional pilgrimage now usurped by modern technology; or, in the case of the assorted tourists among this human cargo, from the sacred implications of the destination. "Even you, in and of yourself, may, in a sense, be cross-cultural," state Castaing-Taylor and Ilisa Barbash, authors of the handbook *Cross-Cultural Filmmaking*. In *Manakamana*, Spray and Velez employ the travellers' enforced proximity



and shared elevation as a means to obviate certain cultural hierarchies. Suspension, here, is also a leveller: a sense of stupefied enchantment, when swaying, tethered to the ether, becomes the common element that crosses generational, gender, and cultural lines. Perhaps there is an ancient word in Sanskrit for the way ears become blocked at high altitude, but it doesn't take an anthropologist to recognize this as a universal experience.

Unlike *Leviathan*'s suffocating immersion with its piscine protagonists, Spray and Velez's deliberate framing of their almost exclusively human subjects (one cleverly deployed exception reveals caprine cargo) has a perhaps unintentionally humorous effect, akin to that of photographic portraiture (as well as the impassive, mannerist comedy of Tati). Characters trapped in the camera's gaze writhe self-consciously or ap-

pear utterly indifferent, their discomfiture or amusement registered bodily. In this sense, *Manakamana* partakes of the real while never ceasing to be a performance; indeed, many of the subjects were cast (some from Spray's adoptive Nepalese family, others from her 2009 documentary *As Long As There's Breath*), which complicates that principle of random selection by which documentary practice attempts to confer a degree of truth to what is being filmed. The presence of the camera—and of sound recordist Spray and camera operator Velez who, unseen by the camera, sit in the cable cars opposite their subjects—intervenes upon its subjects, and this very intervention constitutes the film's plane of reality. The influence of the camera cannot be reduced or diminished: it too belongs to the same technological realm as the cable car, both representing encroachments upon a landscape and life-

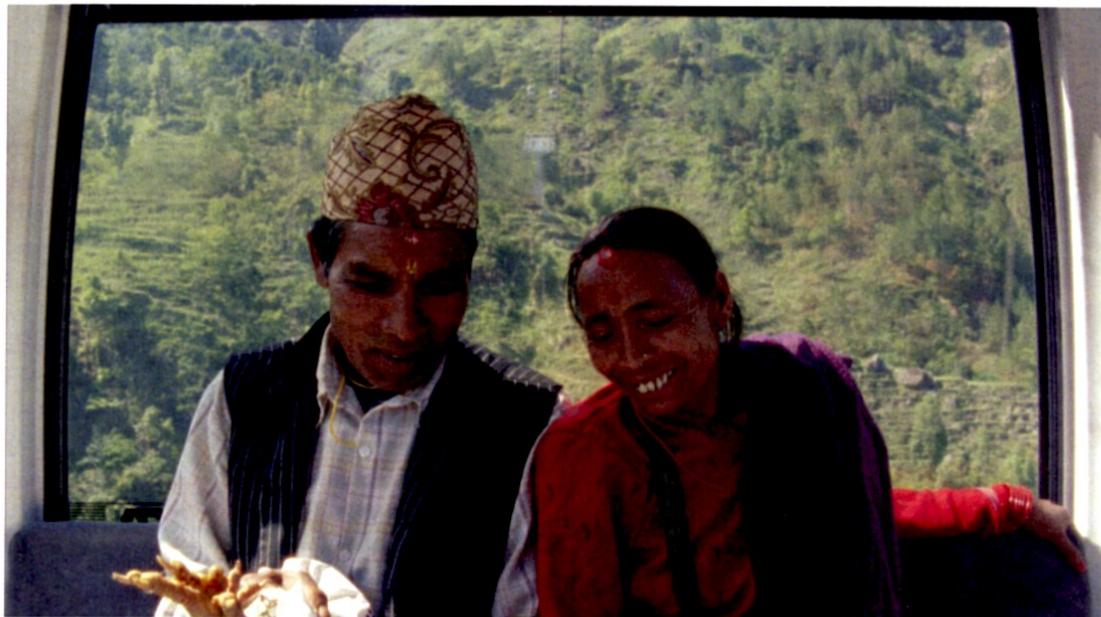


style hitherto more attuned to the natural. Yet *Manakamana* is neither an elegy to the pastoral nor a critique of modernization; rather, it modestly attests to the possibility that the effects of modernization upon everyday lives and bodies cannot be precisely measured, and thereby moralized.

Just as the ministrations of the goddess whom the pilgrims come to venerate remain invisible, the temple that is their ultimate destination remains unseen throughout *Manakamana*. In the absence of a visible holy site, and a spiritual journey that has been effectively expedited by the installation of an electrified tightrope above a vast jungle, what remains is a surrogate commute in which the sacred and profane collapse into a detached procession, a liminal state in which congregate faithful elders bearing game for slaugh-

ter; bored rockers snapping photos and twirling their hair; co-wives recounting ancient legends and bemoaning a lack of respect; tourists halfheartedly keeping diaries of the ride; women beholding the solubility of frozen confections while attempting to consume them; and traditional musicians tuning their stringed instruments before breaking into song. From this nearly surreal and yet utterly ordinary vantage point, the old trail to the temple can be occasionally glimpsed outside the windows, like a faded scar on the landscape that invokes (perhaps nostalgically) the labours of the original pilgrimage while reminding us that time (and “progress”) wraps us in new skin.

By eliding the physical (and historical) toll of a once arduous journey, the cable car condenses ritual, and the faith com-



mensurate to it. The question, posed of most new technology, is: Are we thereby delivered to our desired destination (whether sacred or secular) simply more conveniently, or does the very nature of our conveyance alter the nature of our pilgrimage? The *Manakamana* cable car short-circuits the distance between what Rebecca Solnit poetically describes as "mount obscurity and mount arrival." *Manakamana* is a record of this circuitry, an index of faces seen in the act of seeing, thrust into the vacancy of a nature that scrolls by like some uncanny rear projection from an old Hollywood film. (In the modern world, our experience of nature may increasingly, and uncannily, come to feel like a simulation.)

Yet the awe elicited by the dramatic setting remains ineffable, beyond the collective and monotonous "Wow" of

the assorted pilgrims. (Spoken language is scarcely the medium to best convey the insights yielded from the film's circumscribed point of view.) Nor, in the relatively steadfast expressions of all who fret upon the cable line's diminutive stage, whether advancing to or retreating from the ancient temple, swaying soporifically in the rarified air, is there evidence that the camera can distinguish between states of rapture and those of boredom. The cable ultimately outlives the celluloid as the film rolls out to black, foreclosing any definitive declaration about the nature of human behaviour, exalted, depraved, exotic, ancient, modern, or otherwise. Listen closely and you can hear, somewhere in the passing whisper of the cable line, the new season's corn coming to harvest.

At a glance, a list (incomplete) of the mysterious Burt Lancaster's kills and conquests:



# A PARADE OF IMAGES SPEAKING FOR THEMSELVES

*Blutch's So Long, Silver Screen*

"All I know about life came out from a box of comics and a few movies," writes the French cartoonist Blutch (*né* Christian Hincker—his nickname derives from a comics character) over an image of a mangy, fur-clad man on horseback racing across a dank and deserted plain that is, somehow, Switzerland. It's a landscape that almost invites a collision between comics and film: to readers of the former, it calls to mind Rodolphe Töpffer, who invented the form in the 19th century; to a lover of the latter, it's turf that has been staked out by Godard in so many of his late works. So perhaps it's inevitable that Blutch's dishevelled chevalier soon comes across old Jean-Luc himself, smoking, scruffy, his hair tufted crazily. And, given the surreal atmosphere of Blutch's comics, it's also unsurprising to find JLG inside an abandoned factory, reeling in rotting fish from a holding tank.

The sophisticated savage meets the filmmaker gone fishin'—these kinds of baffling incongruities are the very stuff of Blutch's comics. The first of his many books to be translated into English, *So Long, Silver Screen* stages several such unpredictable encounters: Michel Piccoli materializes in the midst of a lovers' spat, the Bardot of *Le mépris* (1963) abruptly replaces Manet's *Olympia*, while Edward Hopper's *New York Movie* stands in for the actual memory of filmgoing. Worrying the boundaries between movies and memory, reality and fantasy, *Silver Screen*'s seven vignettes (each tinted a different colour, like a silent film print) come together to form a kind of found-footage reel: this scene and that scene get spliced together and dubbed over; each quick clip is half-remembered, fetishized, and wrenching out of continuity. The result is an angry, wistful, lushly detailed personal essay about what it means to have watched films in the 20th century.

Blutch's comics have often entwined themselves with movies. After some early apprentice work in short humour strips, where his offbeat plots and virtuosic brushwork won him accolades, the artist came into his own with the novel-length *Péplum* (1996) and the impressionistic, unruly series *Mitchum* (1996–99), whose very titles betray a cinematic influence. *Péplum* revisits the eponymous, déclassé Italian sword-and-sandal epics of the '50s while loosely adapting *Satyricon* (Petronius', though hints of Fellini's remain). *Mitchum*, conversely, at first wears its handle only fancifully, borrowing nothing from the actor except maybe a certain swagger; after Mitchum's death in 1997, however, Blutch pens a brute, wordless tribute to the star, in a story that's half-*policier* and half-nightmare. The comic is less remembrance than homage: Blutch doesn't dwell on biographical details or anecdotes so much as he conjures up the actor's imposing physical presence with brusque, sculptural brushstrokes. No treatment of Mitchum in prose could be half so forceful, half so carnal—ditto Blutch's renderings of Omar Sharif (memorably pictured plunging his face into a stranger's rump on the *métro*) in *Vitesse moderne* (2002), or his Brando,

whose *Last Tango in Paris* (1972) persona appears in the auto-biographical *Le petit Christian 2* (2008) to initiate the pre-teen Blutch into the mysteries of love. ("*L'amour?!! Quelle farce!*")

Blutch's idiosyncratic, experimental works, along with similar efforts from like-minded comrades, broke decisively from the staid Euro-comics of the early '90s. The artists involved in *la nouvelle bande dessinée*—an epithet styled, at least in part, after that earlier cinematic *nouvelle vague*—opposed themselves to a dominant tradition *de papa* that valued only conventional genre work and *les best-sellers*, limiting the field to children's comics and sci-fi. Blutch and his compatriots worked within the small press, unhindered by the commercial constraints of the large publishing houses, more enamoured with life than with genre, and less absorbed in the traditions of comics than they were in the act of drawing itself. Freed from having to attend to niceties of plot, character, and comprehension, Blutch in particular often embraces surreal logic, spinning out shaggy-dog stories in which images and events link together in the most tenuous of narratives, where free association outweighs intelligibility. Little wonder that Buñuel serves as a model for this cartoonist whose work has so often been called oneiric—*Vitesse moderne* not only cites the filmmaker as an influence, but also shares the old master's joy in vulgar disruptions of bourgeois life and self-consciously absurd storylines.

*Silver Screen* bears the mark of Buñuel as well, recalling *That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977) by having different "actors" play the male and female parts in each section of the book, though the roles remain the same. The old lech in this case is always a curmudgeonly cinephile harrumphing and bidding adieu to the movies, while his companion, a pert young gamine, ignores and undercuts his presumptions. The gender dynamics of these dialogues are simple, to be sure—he's negative, she's positive; he's the past, she's the future—but, as with Buñuel's aggressive sexism, the book's hyperbolical masculinity seems calculatedly confrontational. (*Silver Screen* is nothing if not a provocation: for its epigraph, Blutch recreates the point-blank gunshot from *The Great Train Robbery* [1903], one of cinema's first true affronts.) So the chapter "Women in Film" recounts the troubling history of visual pleasure and narrative cinema from Edison's *The Kiss* (1896) onward, equating the film industry with an insatiable ape—be it Kong, Bonzo, or Dr. Zaius—that paws at and manoeuvres actresses for its own profit and pleasure. But the book is also leeringly complicit in that history: depending on one's particular taste for perversity, the centrepiece of the chapter is either a full-page image of male spectators agog at Blutch's renditions of Monroe, Ekberg, and Hayworth, or a loving catalogue of Kirk Douglas' hair-pulling and face-slapping scenes with his female co-stars.

The primal, bestial nature of the screen's great actors comes under scrutiny in *Silver Screen* again and again. Elsewhere in his work, Blutch has been fascinated with dancers and artists' models—with the gestural, the corporeal, with bodies in motion or at rest. Although directors appear in force throughout *Silver Screen* (Visconti, Godard, Welles), it's what their cameras record, the physical fact of an actor's existence, that most interests Blutch. And while the cartoonist serves up the

requisite cheesecake renderings of Bardot and Jane Russell in all their pneumatic splendour, he surprisingly devotes his most extended odes to actorly flesh to the intriguingly dissimilar masculinities of Michel Piccoli and Burt Lancaster. Piccoli, with his thick trunk thatched with hair, his dad-like virility profoundly unsettling, and Lancaster, performing acrobatics in a ship's rigging, frisking immodestly through *Vera Cruz* (1954)—each provides occasion for Blutch to meditate on cinema's particular brand of mortality. "Film after film," says a sagging Lancaster, "we die in public." Cue an astonishing sequence of 20 panels, each a headshot of the star in a different role—the beautiful Lancaster of Siodmak and Tourneur, the leonine Lancaster of Malle and Peckinpah, living and raging and smiling and dying on that brief page. "Piccoli," on the other hand, "was the body and its functions," according to one of Blutch's cinephile stand-ins. "In short, meat. Meat on display."

The book shortly returns to the scene between Bardot and Piccoli at the beginning of *Le mépris*, and one begins to suspect what Godard was fishing for in that earlier passage. What the filmmaker is angling after is rot, meat, mortality itself—this, finally, is what Blutch both celebrates and laments in the cinema. (The spectacle of one's demise is an obscene pleasure for this artist: in his sole directorial credit, for the interstitials in the animated *Peur(s) du noir* [2007], the villain of the piece grins into a mirror and dances a jig as he sics a mastiff on himself, revelling in his own disembowelment.) Cinema, for Blutch, is divided between meat and memory, between the physical and the ephemeral, between the present, rushing onward like the train on the book's final page, and the history that gets left behind. Piccoli and Godard, thank God, are both still with us at the end of *Silver Screen*, seated on that onrushing train—though one is trussed and gagged, and the other has had enough of both the movies and the spectre of the 20th century. "This is where I get off," says Piccoli, inscrutable behind eyebrows, jowls, a near-century of existence. So long...

**Cinema Scope:** How long had you been thinking about this book? How did it develop?

**Blutch:** This book took me by surprise. I was working on two different projects—one called *Adieu Paul Newman*, the other *Le reflux*—when it cropped up unexpectedly, imposed itself, outstripped and even absorbed the first two. This reflection on cinema, on motion pictures, has been biding its time for a good while. I've kept notes about this for more than 30 years. It was time to freeze it all in still images. *My images, those of la bande dessinée.*

**Scope:** There have been passages in your other books that could almost have appeared here: the bit with Omar Sharif in *Vitesse moderne*, with Brando in *Le petit Christian*, or with Mitchum in *Mitchum*. Is that earlier work reflecting on the same themes as *Silver Screen*? Are there any topics you didn't approach in *Silver Screen* that you wish you had?

**Blutch:** No, I don't think so. I've sometimes made use of actors, living and dead, in my stories. Because I find them handsome, inspiring, and inexpensive. But they're involved in the stories you mention merely in an allegorical form. Their pres-

ence fills out a fictional narrative. They poeticize it, I'd say. *So Long, Silver Screen* is not a novelistic story; it's an essay. The ideas reeled off certainly go beyond the basic premise of cinema, to talk about something else...The years that slip away from us. The dominance of men over women. The horror of growing old. To prove that different eras don't exist and that since the beginning, there has only ever been one and the same: the human era. Finally, the most foolish of pretensions: to put the 20th century in a bottle. Of subjects I have not addressed, I will say nothing: I am trying to express them in my next book, which isn't yet finished.

**Scope:** You've said in another interview that the word "cinephile" rubs you the wrong way, and that you don't think of yourself as a specialist in film. How would you describe your interactions with cinema?

**Blutch:** I dread becoming what's called a "specialist." I'm not a historian, much less a critic, and maybe even not an intellectual. I've watched movies for 40 years and I'm fortunate enough to remember them, to hold onto them, because it's an activity that I love.

**Scope:** In the strips collected in *Total Jazz* (2004), you don't just tell stories about jazz, but you also often try to make your comics flow like jazz, or look like how jazz sounds. Would you say there's anything cinematic about *Silver Screen*?

**Blutch:** Absolutely not. *Silver Screen* is built entirely as a story in comics, untranslatable in another form—I hope, non-transferable, unadaptable. Comics is a form of literature (a strange way of making poetry); I see it as even closer to theatre than to cinema. This is my language, and I express myself with the grammar of comics.

**Scope:** To turn that around a bit, is it fair to say that *Silver Screen* is a jazz treatment of movies—that you use movies as a theme from which you improvise your strips?

**Blutch:** Nothing is improvised. Everything is painfully and carefully written and constructed. I sweat over it, believe me, before I start to draw.

**Scope:** How does your approach to movies differ from that of other cartoonists? How is the cinema as understood by Blutch different from the way that Tarkovsky and Herzog helped inspire Mattotti's *Fires* (1986), for example? Or how is it different from Kim Deitch's work, or Charles Berberian's recent book *Cinérama* (2012)?

**Blutch:** Difficult to say. I didn't think of any of my colleagues when I started this book. It was so personal, so intimate, that I felt (which is nice) like a Robinson on a remote island. Alone with myself. In any case, I wanted to avoid trivial detail. To say something and not just prattle on.

**Scope:** You quote Alain Cuny here as saying that the movies are "a moronic milieu... where eight out of every ten people are idiots," so it doesn't matter what one's accomplished in his career. "Movies are a trash heap, a junkyard!" Is this at all like comics?

**Blutch:** You could say that, over all human activity, there hovers the shadow of human weakness.

**Scope:** You've tried your hand at directing, with *Peur(s) du noir*, and you have a very different approach to animation and storytelling than we see in the films of other French cartoonists like Joann Sfar, Winshluss, or Marjane Satrapi. Did you



learn anything from the filmmaking experience that you've applied to comics? Would you direct again?

**Blutch:** I'm not comfortable with animation. I never really liked it, even as a kid. I preferred real actors. That said, all the experiences that I've accumulated in 45 years can be found in my comics. Professional experiences, sentimental experiences, and tire changes by the side of the road in the middle of the night under pouring rain.

**Scope:** You recently drew the poster for Resnais' *Vous n'avez encore rien vu* (2012), and you've selected *La guerre est*

*finie* (1966) for a carte blanche screening. Do you feel that you share a sensibility with Resnais? I know he's worked with Jules Feiffer and Stan Lee—any chance of collaborating?

**Blutch:** We share, Resnais and I, a childish and profound taste for comics. I did posters for two of his films [*Les herbes folles* (2009) is the other], and am more closely attached to the development of the next film. I drew large landscapes that are integrated into the story. The film is called *Aimer, boire et chanter*. I can't let myself talk too much about it, because it's his undertaking, not mine. I am at the service of the artist. And

I don't know what he wants to reveal. What I can say is that we have talked a lot about [the great adventure-strip cartoonist] Roy Crane.

**Scope:** You've cited Buñuel as an influence for *Vitesse moderne*, but *La volupté* (2006) almost feels more Buñuelian. Is he still an influence, in *Silver Screen*? What about Renoir, whom you've also referred to in *Blotch* (1999) and *Mitchum*?

**Blutch:** Buñuel is always conspicuous, as is Renoir. In *La volupté*, there's also a lot of Renoir's *La règle du jeu* (1939). And in *Silver Screen*, quite a bit of Bergman: I'm thinking notably of the famous *Scenes from a Marriage* (1973). All this mixed with Verlaine, [André] Hardellet, [Léo] Ferré, Van Eyck, Courbet, Ellington, and others of the dead who will forgive me for forgetting them here.

**Scope:** You thank Luc Moullet at the end of *Silver Screen*. What impact has he had on the book?

**Blutch:** I'm indebted to Moullet for having opened a road for me with *Politique des acteurs* (1993), a fundamental book without which *So Long, Silver Screen* wouldn't exist. I can say the same of Godard's *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1988-98). I take my hat off to these two old gentlemen.

**Scope:** There are many fine-art references in the book that escape me—I caught Manet's *Olympia* and Courbet's *L'origine du monde*, but that's about it. You've told Visconti's story, in particular, only with reference to fine-art traditions. What are the similarities you see between the histories of painting and of cinema? Why use the language of painting to talk about cinema?

**Blutch:** If I knew about culinary art, I would use cuisine

to talk about cinema. What matters is to create images. For this, I sometimes marry disparate and seemingly paradoxical elements. I try to give rise to a tension...

**Scope:** On the back cover of the French edition, you repeat an image from earlier in the book, but with a slight change. In both cases, you draw a full-page image of an audience with 3-D glasses on. But where the earlier picture shows an audience made up entirely of drooling, bourgeois white men, the later image portrays a multi-racial audience of both men and women, of all different ages and classes. Is this scene less angry than the rest of the book?

**Blutch:** No, it's a real image, so to speak. Everyone eating the same soup. The entire world in the same boat.

**Scope:** Which actors today have the same kind of presence that you celebrate with Lancaster, Piccoli, William Holden...? Perhaps Denis Lavant?

**Blutch:** We don't have the same stature as our fathers because we no longer smoke two packs of cigarettes a day and we no longer eat red meat at every meal. We are different. They were men with deep voices, while we are little boys grown old.

**Scope:** Are you done with cinema, or are you still keeping in touch with it? I feel like there's a kinship between your book and something like *Holy Motors* (2012), for instance, with its vignette structure, and its elegies for an era of cinema that's passed.

**Blutch:** It's curious, yes. I worked on the poster for *Holy Motors* until the last minute, and ultimately, it was rejected by the "salespeople."

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# BLACK, WHITE AND GIALLO

*Forzani and Cattet's The Strange Colour of Your Body's Tears*

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BY JASON ANDERSON

Any viewer in need of a primer on the semiotics of the giallo film will be well-served by the opening moments of *The Strange Colour of Your Body's Tears*. In commencing their second full-length effort after their similarly arresting debut *Amer* (2009), the Belgian husband-and-wife team of Bruno Forzani and Hélène Cattet rapidly proceed down the lurid checklist of essential sights that no self-respecting exercise in the genre could do without.

Indeed, variations of these images can be found on the jacket artwork or menu pages of countless lavish DVD reissues of Italian cinema's nexus of the occult, the uncanny, the erotic, and the deadly. These are films whose most notorious contents exceed even the unwieldiest of English-language titles. (My hastily selected top three includes *The Perfume of the Lady in Black* [1974], *The Red Queen Kills Seven Times* [1972], and the inimitable *Your Vice Is a Locked Room and Only I Have the Key* [1972].)

No slouches at titles themselves, Forzani and Cattet open *The Strange Colour of Your Body's Tears* with the requisite degree of flourish. Behold, if you dare...a woman's lips against

a knife, pressing as if to deliver a kiss...the face of a creepy child's doll, the sole witness to any imminent transgression...arms trussed and restrained by ropes, pulled tighter before being unexpectedly cut...a woman's naked torso, a blade drawn across a nipple (but not cutting it, at least not yet)...a mouth in mid-gasp...a clenched hand...a single eye gone wide with terror.

Intercut with a colour sequence of the film's steely-eyed male hero arriving on the scene and the title credits (rendered in red, of course), this staccato array of black-and-white images partially serves to introduce the mystery at hand. The man we see is Dan (Klaus Tange), a businessman who has returned from a trip to the apartment he shares with his girlfriend, only to find her gone and the door chained from the inside. The images may be perceived as clues to her fate, as well as elements in a mystery that widens to encompass many of Dan's neighbours in the gorgeous Art Nouveau building where they live in Brussels.

Yet they also re-establish the directors' ardent devotion to giallo's seedy vocabulary, right down to the most requisite item on the list: the black leather gloves worn by the unseen killer. Of all the fetish objects on near-continual display during giallo's heyday—an era that roughly stretches between post-*Psycho* Mario Bava murder-thons like *Blood and Black Lace* (1965) through to Ruggero Deodato, Lamberto Bava and Umberto Lenzi's ever more thuggish efforts to outdo the misogyny of the American slasher films in the '80s—those gloves have become the most iconic. It's an infamous piece of giallo lore that Dario Argento favoured wearing the gloves himself in any insert shot he needed for the innumerable strangulations, stabbings, hammer attacks and involuntary defenestrations that fill his oeuvre.

Perennially stylish yet full of diabolical associations, those leather gloves have come to stand for more than just a nod to Argento, a filmmaker whose own efforts to capitalize on his late-career cachet reached a nadir with the incompetent self-pastiche of *Giallo* (2009). Instead, they represent something more like the genre's state of perennial fashionability, something it's enjoyed ever since the late '90s, when American companies like Anchor Bay and Image began reissuing DVDs of titles that had been only available internationally in expurgated forms, if at all.

Before then, giallo's profile was relatively negligible beyond ardent cultists, which is why Geoffrey O'Brien seemed particularly savvy when he gave it unusual prominence among the more respectable Hollywood and European fare that sparks his reveries in *The Phantom Empire* (1993), his semi-delirious survey of cinema's first century. O'Brien must have been bemused to see giallo catch on with a new generation of pop-culture cannibals, given the original works' own tendency to eat themselves. Writing not long before the genre's skuzzy memes would be given new life thanks to DVD, O'Brien perceived the strange value of these artifacts, these movies that "annulled any possible distinction between the beautiful and the corrupt by perfecting an ultrarefined tawdriness, a cinema of poetic cruelty whose practitioners (Mario Bava, Vittorio Cottafavi, Riccardo Freda, Antonio Margheriti, Sergio Corbucci, Dario Argento) would turn out to have been the au-

thentic inventors of the post-postmodern movie: authentic because they invented nothing, because they stole from their own movies, because they were unable to stop obsessively tacking together a recycled dub of a dub of some archaic internalized European narrative."

And yet the movies have not only survived but attracted acolytes, Forzani and Cattet having emerged as the most studious of the lot. The enduring appeal is not so hard to understand. The flamboyant displays of '70s Euro-chic most certainly point to a love of plumage that few contemporary thrillers share. The same goes for their assaultive soundtracks—since even many of the lowliest giallo entries came equipped with an enviably audacious musical score, it's no wonder that Forzani and Cattet have opted to repurpose excerpts from vintage works for their own films. (The new score makes stunning use of themes and stings by Riz Ortolani, Bruno Nicolai, and the ubiquitous Ennio Morricone.) And though the genre's most outré examples may be too viciously and salaciously sadistic for thrill-seekers of later generations, the intermingling of violent and erotic content may also seem defiantly adult when compared to the typically adolescent sensibility of the vast majority of modern descendants.

But one reason Forzani and Cattet's films are so alluring and unnerving is how well they tap into giallo's fundamental core of irrationality. They invest a new elegance and a renewed vigour into the "science of plotless shock and dismemberment." O'Brien intended that phrase to serve as faint praise for Bava and his successor Argento, but it's also suggestive of the careful manner in which *The Strange Colour of Your Body's Tears* induces ever more advanced stages of dread and derangement on the viewer's part.

The new film also confirms that the duo's objective is something other than paying homage to their forebears. In an interview conducted shortly after the film's Locarno premiere, Forzani and Cattet prefer another description of their goals: "We tell an intimate story and we develop a personal universe through this vocabulary. We don't see the two films only as homages—it's just one face of them. There is something behind this surface."

Venturing behind surfaces is one of the primary fixations for several characters in the new film. When not being badgered by a detective who suspects Dan of murdering his girlfriend, our stricken hero conducts his own investigation, a process that uncovers a shadow world that exists within his apartment building. Many of the people he meets have their own cautionary tales to impart. In one of the film's most ingenious set-pieces, an elderly woman describes how her doctor husband's obsession with strange noises in their ceiling led to his own disappearance. Elsewhere, a woman is menaced by a faceless figure that can sequester itself under the wallpaper. Exploring ever further into the building, Dan comes to discover a series of secret corridors and concealed rooms, which may also be considered physical manifestations of the desires that his girlfriend kept hidden.

Yet other events posit Dan himself as a series of surfaces. That notion is strikingly literalized in a sequence in which Dan contends with a rapidly expanding number of doppelgangers.



*The Strange Colour of Your Body's Tears*

Then there is the bracingly visceral scene in which the hero faces off against the inevitable knife-wielding maniac, the twist here being that the assailant appears to be attacking from somewhere underneath the victim's skin.

As you might suspect, a quality of dream or nightmare logic permeates much of *The Strange Colour of Your Body's Tears*, even though its creators remain so insistent about the dictates of the mystery narrative that they've intentionally seeded the film with clues about the killer's identity. (Anyone who can determine the solution from the evidence here deserves a substantial cash prize; I might even provide it.) Further confusion is generated by the difficulty in determining whether the story is meant to have a contemporary setting—while the appearance of a cellphone definitely points to the affirmative, nearly every other element of the décor implies otherwise. The filmmakers give a good portion of the credit to the mix of eras that marks the look of Brussels, their home and that of most of the locations for the new film. "We think these Art Nouveau buildings give an oneiric aspect to the city," they suggest. "The look of 19th-century houses inside a modern city has inspired us to create a fantastic universe with no period boundaries."

In fact, the playfulness they demonstrate in regards to narrative forms and temporal ambiguities may actually steer them away from giallo terrain into the most avidly surreal varieties of Japanese anime. The filmmakers cite Kon Satoshi as a primary influence, and it's easy to see how both of the team's films share the ever-dissolving storylines of Kon's *Millennium Actress* (2001) and *Paprika* (2006). Kon in turn has cited Kurt Vonnegut Jr. and Philip K. Dick as aesthetic heroes, so maybe there's an aspect of hearty all-American weirdness in the team's neo-giallos as well.

There's a further deviation from the mean when it comes to the films' sexual component. A fear of the femme fatale is

nevertheless a prominent element of the new film, whose eagerness to blur boundaries between pleasure and pain is most memorably demonstrated when broken glass is crushed into Dan's chest by the breasts of a sinister seductress. (We might also note the distinctly vaginal appearance of more than one knife wound.) But Forzani and Cattet are usually too savvy to trade in the misogyny that is giallo's most frequent sin.

"*Amer* takes the point of view of a female protagonist," they note. "This time it's a male point of view. We have approached the two films with the mix of our points of view as male and female directors so the two films complete each other. In *Amer*, the fantasy objects were the men—here, in this one they are the women. As we love playing with fear and desire to increase the excitation of the main characters and submerge the audience in their own labyrinthian minds, these fantasies are sometimes oppressive and nightmarish but they are ultimately about the fear of the unknown and of the main character's own dark side. It's about what he or she projects onto the others."

Those who have dismissed Forzani and Cattet's films as mere exercises in style may be surprised to learn that they've spared a thought about subtext, too. And even so, it's hard to complain about style when it's so unabashedly extravagant. Likewise, the points at which the plot's eddies, loops, and blind alleys cause either film to lose momentum are easily forgiven in light of the gloriously irrational and intoxicating nature of their set-pieces, of which *The Strange Colour of Your Body's Tears* contains their most superb to date. Here and elsewhere, there's a feeling that the team have successfully adapted the giallo film to their own purposes rather than merely recreated its poetic cruelties. They'd be inclined to agree. "The cinematic vocabulary of the giallo fits perfectly into our universe and the subjects we approach," they offer. "It is a very rich and creative language with which we take a lot of freedom!"



# ATHENS DECATHLON

TIFF 2013 *City to City*

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BY ADAM NAYMAN

You can probably trace the idea—or at least the exact etymology—of the so-called “Greek Weird Wave” back to a 2011 *Guardian* article by Steve Rose. In it, the author sagely mused that “the world’s most messed-up country is making the world’s most messed-up cinema.” Of course, the movies that prompted Rose’s declaration—Yorgos Lanthimos’ *Dogtooth* (2009) and Athina Rachel Tsangari’s *Attenberg* (2011)—weren’t so much messed-up as skillfully stripped down, the latter a coming-of-age fable with the clichés tossed away, the former a chamber piece as rigorously proportioned and worked out as a zero-remainder long division equation. Weird, yes, but savvy, too. That the films contained their share of (bad) sex and (brutal) violence could just as easily have been chalked up to shifting modes of international art-house cinema as any sort of uniquely fraught national zeitgeist. If anything, *Dogtooth* becomes considerably weaker when interpreted as an allegory

about corrupted national values rather than as an imaginative and intensive acting exercise, which is how its director seemed happier to describe it.

Whatever their merits, *Dogtooth* and *Attenberg*—and to a lesser extent Lanthimos’ comparatively underrated neo-Ionesco riff *ALPS* (2011), which failed to achieve the same sort of critical traction—have quite suddenly made Greek cinema a going concern. Maybe not for Greek filmmakers themselves, who are still working in a local funding vacuum where money has to be solicited from outside sources (“The Greek Film Centre is fighting against a slow death,” reported Tsangari in a recent interview with *Cleo*). But the Mediterranean is now suddenly a very desirable destination for film festival programmers. The selection of Athens as the epicentre of TIFF’s annual City to City section, which previously touched town in Tel Aviv, Buenos Aires, and Mumbai, scans as timely, even if the precise scheduling is a little off. Sadly, neither Lanthimos nor Tsangari has a new feature ready. But their shadows still fall over several of the selections in the ten-film series—can a TIFF program be a decathlon?—which is heavy on austere freak shows in the *Dogtooth* mold.

Exhibit A is Alexandros Avranas' Venice competition entry *Miss Violence*, a smoothly pureed mash-up of scenes and styles borrowed from a variety of ice-sculpturist auteurs. The film is barely five minutes old before an angelic child plunges from an apartment balcony à la *Antichrist* (2009), while the central riddle—why did an 11-year-old girl growing up in an ostensibly prosperous and loving modern family decide to off herself?—recalls Michael Haneke's 1989 landmark *The Seventh Continent*, which is starting to look more and more like Patient Zero for a decades-long outbreak of chilly festival cinema. I also spotted a preteen-girl-dances-to-pop number suspiciously reminiscent of Denis Côté's *Curling* (2010), although to his credit, Avranas gets better mileage out of a carefully chosen Leonard Cohen cut than Sarah Polley did. His use of "Dance Me to the End of Love" as the soundtrack for an act of self-harm is sneaky indeed.

The problem with *Miss Violence* isn't its director's sticky fingers, but his heavy hand. For a film that ostensibly pivots on a mystery, it isn't very mysterious. Once you figure out that the Deceptively Average Middle Class Greek Family at its centre is squirming under the thumb of its pig-eyed pater (Themis Panou), and that it's always been this way, and that the whole sad state of affairs can only be reversed by a definitive uprising from within the household, there isn't much to do but wait out whatever show-off sadism Avranas has in store along the way. (The winner: a protracted single-take rape sequence that plays out like a shot across Gaspar Noé's bow.)

There certainly is a lot of "brilliant" filmmaking in *Miss Violence*: Avranas composes the hell out of most of his shots, either decapitating his cast members via the top of the frame (once again recalling *Dogtooth*) or crowding them around dinner tables so we can study the play of emotions across their faces. Panou is very good, too, adroitly modulating his performance from menacing to monstrous. The movie is impressively pressurized, but the air inside is both hot and thin. It isn't breathtaking. It's suffocating.

There's a more breathable atmosphere wafting through Penny Panayotopoulou's *September*, which also owes a few debts around town (mostly to Maren Ade's *The Forest for the Trees* [2004]), but is very much its own movie. The ashen and angular Kora Karvouni stars as Anna, an unattached woman in her mid-30s who works a menial job at a chain restaurant and whose life revolves around her dog, Manu. In a series of short, efficient strokes, Panayotopoulou sketches a portrait of loneliness at once tempered and exacerbated by constant canine companionship. Anna's routine of early bedtimes and hasty lunch breaks in the restaurant's parking lot with Manu in tow is a quietly vicious cycle—one that seems unsustainable for both the character and the film. When Manu dies, she shrinks even further away from the world before being drawn out by Sophia (Maria Skoula), an attractive neighbour who treats Anna with all the patience and compassion afforded by her own comparatively comfy position as a well-heeled wife and mother.

Where *Miss Violence* hastens to make good on its title as soon as possible, *September* slow-plays—and then downplays—any sense of threat. Anna's interactions with Sophia and her children are harmless enough, even if the latter's husband

(Nikos Diamantais) perceives her as a leech. It's uncomfortable to watch Anna's affection become desperate (just as it was in *The Forest for the Trees*), but the film never threatens to become a full-on creepfest. The script fortunately foregoes any sort of *Fatal Attraction* (1987) hijinks in favour of gently attenuated fallout, with nary a false note struck. It's not world-beating cinema, by any means, but the low-key smartness of Panayotopoulou's direction, in which the camera's immobility seems tied to the protagonist's sense of impasse rather than a desire to trap the audience, subtly trumps Avranas' "brilliance." *Miss Violence* ends with a closed door; *September* has an conclusion that's truly open, and, viewed from the right angle, arguably more unsettling than anything in the other film's cache of hidden horrors.

The refreshing thing about *September* is that neither Anna nor her dilemma is a stand-in for anything larger. It's nothing more than a well-observed character study, and also happily nothing less. Elsewhere, the City to City picks betray a whole lot of conceptual sociology, which in almost every case boils down to a variation on that old epigram: "It's the economy, stupid." For instance, fiscal-meltdown metaphors don't come much more obvious than the revered Athenian figurehead holding himself for a king's ransom in *The Eternal Return of Antonis Paraskevas*, which casts *Dogtooth* alpha dog Christos Stergioglou (who has a cameo in *September*) as a slightly different species of whacked-out shut-in. The titular character is a faded talk-show host who has gotten his name back in the news by arranging his own kidnapping and then hides out waiting for the right moment to make his glorious return: he's Rupert Pupkin and Jerry Langford wrapped up into one slowly decaying package.

This king of comedy longs to return to his own personal glory days of the early '90s, and probably the funniest thing about this mostly amusing movie is how it envisions that heady decade and the subsequent country-wide collapse as merely the latest in a series of vanished Greek empires. It's as if, with its Hellenic origins 2,000 years out of reach, the best the country might hope for is a return to a time when everyone at least watched the same morning talk show. Writer-director Elina Psykou isn't exactly reinventing the wheel of symbolism in her debut by having her antihero inhabit a dilapidated hotel—shades of Kubrick rather than Scorsese—and yet it's also an appropriately transient backdrop for a story about an icon staring down the fact of his own impermanence.

There's a more straightforward abduction narrative in *The Daughter*, which hits the theme of debt square on the head: it even stops to have its kidnapper read out the dictionary definition of "debt" to her victim. It's not especially believable that a 14-year-old girl would snatch the eight-year-old son of her disappeared father's business partner, much less that she'd be able to keep him secreted away at a deserted lumber yard (a locale which, combined with the film's title, loudly announces that director Thanos Anastopoulos has seen the Dardennes' *Le fils* [2005]). But despite its hardscrabble surfaces, *The Daughter* isn't really a realistic work: it's a thesis film about how humiliation and poverty beget reckless acts of vengeance, in this case on behalf of a cash-strapped proletariat. "The driv-

er of the car is responsible for the accident," explains the film's precocious combination pro-and-antagonist with the help of her trusty dictionary.

Look up "unsubtle" in the dictionary, meanwhile, and you'd probably find a picture of *The Daughter*, or maybe Yorgos Servetas' *Standing Aside, Watching*, a return-of-the-prodigal drama that dares (if that's the right word) to name its heroine "Antigone." Suffice it to say that the men in her seaside hometown, where she's returning after a failed sojourn in the big city, are right to be on edge: as played by Marina Symeou, this Antigone is a ticking time bomb waiting to go off in the face of the patriarchy. (Alternate title: *Miss Violence*.) *Standing Aside, Watching* isn't especially compassionate about its small-town setting: the place is a dump (the camera keeps returning to the local scrap yard) and so Antigone's as-trigency becomes a virtue in and of itself. But the movie is itself a little bit too clean: it's got the sort of slow-burn structure that can make an audience feel like they're watching something patient and thoughtful when a filmmaker is really just goldbricking.

There is an even more punishing pace to *To the Wolf*, a co-directorial debut (by London-born Aran Hughes and Athens native Christina Koutsopyrou) that is at once the program's most fragile and its orneriest piece of work. It's set not in Athens but a misty village whose inhabitants have no need to rage against the dying of the light: the sun is perpetually obscured by clouds and mountains. Huddled together in hovels or bleakly decorated bars, the almost exclusively stooped and wizened locals talk

politics ("there used to be a state but we destroyed it") and argue over frizzy television signals ("the channel is on strike"). A woman kicking what looks like a furry rock down a beaten path wonders about the possibility of eating it; guts (but whose?) are left spilled carelessly on the floor for the dogs to finish off. Taken as documentary, this is gruelling stuff; taken as fiction it verges on *Borat*-esque ethnic caricature. But *To the Wolf* slips in between the binaries. It was filmed with both the collaboration and cooperation of its subjects, as the directors' original plan to craft a piece of village vérité shifted when they realized that the news—and the consequences—of the financial crisis had spread well beyond the nation's capital.

Instead of making a movie about a character's response to Greece's failing economy—as in *The Eternal Return of Antonis Paraskevas*, or even more obviously, *The Daughter*—Hughes and Koutsopyrou focus their attention on people with almost comically limited options, and end up producing something richly suggestive. In a country that often trumpets its own sense of history, *To the Wolf* obliterates any nostalgia for an older way of life. The telephone towers that lurk like Martian tripods in the background only enhance the sense of isolation—information only flows one way here—but more than that, they look like something very Greek indeed: ancient relics. The predator of the movie's title is time, which seems to be hunting in reverse. *To the Wolf* offers the strange sight of the distant past overtaking and devouring a hobbled, tense present.



A collage of images for the Malopolska Film Commission. It includes a landscape of mountains and hills, a grand theater interior with ornate decorations and a 'CULTURE' banner, a modern building at night with a 'FINANCING' banner, a close-up of wooden scaffolding with a 'PRODUCTION' banner, and a bridge over water with a 'LOCATIONS' banner.



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# TEMPS MORT

*Jim Jarmusch's Only Lovers Left Alive*



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BY ANDREW TRACY

"I'm sick of it—these zombies, what they've done to the world, their fear of their own imaginations," laments the vampiric Adam (Tom Hiddleston) via videophone to his similarly succubal, Tangier-dwelling lady love Eve (Tilda Swinton) early in *Only Lovers Left Alive*. Zeitgeist be damned, nevertheless it's fitting that the predominant pop-cultural ghouls of the time be set up as the opposing poles of *Only Lovers*' moral universe (even if one of them is here only figurative), as many of the motifs once associated with the bloodsucking undead—*infection and disease, death and decay*—have passed on to the flesh-eating walking dead. How and why that transfer occurred would require a tiresome pop-cult exegesis, so for the moment let's

just suggest that one of the reasons might have to do with the nature of the beasts' respective hungers. If vampiric blood-lust can be all-consuming, it's also controllable once sated; the craving does not crowd out culture and civility. Zombified hunger, by contrast, is endless and mindless: it is constant consumption, consumption as the sole drive of a once-human vessel emptied of absolutely everything else. As good old George A. Romero's use of the shambling ghouls for a leftist critique of rampaging capitalism and middle-class apathy has evolved, in this fast-zombie era, into a stealth right-wing vision of the revolt of the underclass hordes, the less overtly political vampire genre has more and more made vampirism a marker of cultural elitism; to paraphrase Orwell on Graham Greene, vampirism seems a sort of high-class nightclub, entry to which is reserved for the culturati only.

This, of course, is the central—and, conceptually if not in execution, very funny—joke of *Only Lovers*’ premise: vampires as the ultimate in world-weary hipsters, immortality granting them the ability to quite literally be there for and have seen everything before you did. “We’ve seen all this before,” Eve comforts the morose Adam as he decries the dreadful state of all that he surveys: “If the sand is running out, time to turn the hourglass upside down again.” But even eternal life, it seems, is not enough to withstand the corrosion of the contemporary world, and in this—as well as its insistent cine-, biblio-, and melophilic motifs, full-stop for musical numbers and Adam’s underlined invocation of “imagination”—*Only Lovers* is in many ways a continuation of Jarmusch’s last film, *The Limits of Control* (2009), rather than (or in addition to) the smirking autoportrait/critique that many were expecting it to be.

While it would certainly be easy for him to simply fall back on those most obviously recognizable elements of his style, Jarmusch, if not alone in this among American filmmakers, has nevertheless been notable for never resting on his laurels. Even when he literally returned to his past work in *Coffee and Cigarettes* (2003) by stitching together three of the deadpan vignettes he made from 1986 to 1993, the eight new episodes subtly developed his formerly modest conceit into an intricate little comic-philosophical machine. More ambitious and considerably less successful, *Limits* saw Jarmusch expanding his aesthetic palette (with self-consciously painterly compositions and architectural framings à la Costa) while foreshortening his thematic depth. Foregoing the elegant and evocative thematic windings of *C & C*, Jarmusch here moved message downstage, garbed in a filigree-thin coating of enigma. A radical-democratic manifesto of cultural resistance to globalized capitalist hegemony—which culminated in Isaach de Bankolé’s nameless, nattily besuited culture crusader “using his imagination” to impossibly bypass unbreachable security and strangle the personification of politico-corporate greed (a Cheney-channelling Bill Murray) with a string from a legendary guitar—*Limits* was, to lazily (and shamelessly) quote myself, “not an artistic experience in itself but a series of attitudes and postures towards art.” If Jarmusch’s sentiments were hard to disagree with for anybody who continues to care about art in this as-always-and-more-so art-unfriendly world, the artistic vehicle in which they travelled was, in terms of art qua art, largely negligible.

Though equipped with a protective layer of irony given its conceptual conceit and genre trappings, *Only Lovers* is no less earnest than its predecessor when it comes to decrying the evils of this world. A revered rock musician now withdrawn into Scott Walker-like seclusion, Adam has holed up in a crumbling, isolated mansion on the outskirts of the always crumbling Detroit, composing thunderously doomy instrumentals intended to be heard by no one; depressed and intermittently suicidal, his only links to the outside world are the scruffy-haired scrounger Ian (Anton Yelchin, giving a serviceably dude-y performance), who hooks him up with everything from vintage guitars to a custom-made wooden bullet, and a crooked doctor at an inner-city hospital (Jeffrey Wright, monotonously mugging), who keeps the contraband plasma flowing

to slake that old undead thirst. Following their vid-chat, Eve decamps from her Bowles-country retreat and the company of her old friend Kit (John Hurt), born Christopher Marlowe (“I do wish I’d met Adam before I wrote *Hamlet*,” he muses, “he would have made a marvellous model”) to reunite with her immortal beloved.

Basking in their renewed connubial bliss, the duo quickly settle down to a series of nocturnal reveries where they engage in name-dropping reminiscences (“Byron was a pompous bore,” recalls Adam, “though Mary Wollstonecraft was delicious”), quaff elegant shots of O-negative, and do the town, such as it is: driving past long abandoned auto plants; touring the remains of the once-majestic Michigan Theater, its glorious Renaissance-style roof now arching above a parking lot (which itself stands on the site of Henry Ford’s first garage); and as a balm for the wounded soul, doing a drive-by of the childhood home of one of their culture heroes (“Oh, I love Jack White!” coos Eve as Adam points out the former Stripe’s dead-weathered digs). Even as Adam repeatedly claims, “I don’t have any heroes,” the film is flush with them: Eve forgoes packing clothes for her transatlantic trip in order to stuff her suitcase with beloved books from Cervantes through to David Foster Wallace, their spines lovingly lingered over by Jarmusch’s camera; Adam’s living-room studio sports a photo wall of artistic luminaries, from Kafka and Twain to Nick Ray and Joe Strummer; Adam gloomily name-checks the great scientists whose breakthroughs were met with persecution and exploitation, from Galileo through to Tesla and Einstein (“And they’re *still* arguing about Darwin”).

On one, very prominent, level, this is what *Only Lovers* boils down to: a lament by the culturally and cultishly cool about the injustices visited upon the great (themselves included, perhaps) at the hands of the philistine “zombies” who have snuffed out the brightest lights of their culture while poisoning the planet. Though one should obviously be cautious about reading any character as an author’s mouthpiece, it’s hardly an undue interpretive leap to see in Adam’s immiserated monologues the director’s actual feelings about the way the world has gone, though perhaps absent Adam’s wider-ranging rancour (which extends even to those “zombie rock ‘n’ roll kids” who idolize him). Ostentatiously super-stylish in shades, elegant leather gloves, and attractively cut duds, Adam and Eve may be mildly self-spoofing vicars for Jarmusch and his set (“I love your gloves, they’re really cool,” enthuses goofy Ian to the impeccably poised couple during a night out in a rock club), but they are vicars nonetheless. “You’re just a couple of condescending snobs!” shrieks Eve’s flakey sister Ava (Mia Wasikowska) at the pair as they eject her from the house after she unwelcomely crashes their idyll, an imprecation that’s both groaningly self-aware and utterly without force; Jarmusch is too smart to not mount a counter-argument to his onscreen representatives’ luxurious despair, but too onside with the latter to give its rebuttal any real sense of self-critique.

Of course, it’s not as if Jarmusch is bound to make any kind of self-critique here at all, however much one might wish to read *Only Lovers* as a portrait of the artist as aged hipster based solely on its scenario—but as the film is never truly witty,

moving, stylistically distinguished, or conceptually thought-through, one is left seeking out whatever other interpretive avenues might be left them. On the last-named point, outside of the immortality aspect the vampire metaphor remains curiously underdeveloped. It would have fit if Jarmusch's seen-it-all scenesters pursued blood in a strictly functional, quotidian manner, as the means to sustain their centuries-long sulk, but Jarmusch quite explicitly films their imbibings as though they were getting a fix: heads slowly sinking backwards in a dreamy narcotic haze, fangs emerging in ecstatic grins. There are numerous possible lines of thematic development this motif of rapture could have followed, given the amorous connotations of the film's title (and the fact that it is a profoundly *solitary* rapture might have introduced an intriguingly ironic note to Adam and Eve's not exactly Edenic reunion), but those paths remain resolutely untaken. Also, on the autocritical note: surely there is something to be explored here about how the undead lovers' immortal existence and lavishly appointed malaise is predicated on quite literally feeding off those very "zombies" they scorn? There is, finally, some attention paid to the lovers' innately predatory nature in the final scenes, when the plasma-starved duo set their sights on an obliviously amorous couple, but this only highlights the film's vagueness about Adam and Eve's view of/relationship to the humans who are their inferiors, (sometime) inspirations, and prey.

Furthermore, the leadenness of the assorted would-be bon mots is equal to that of late-period Woody Allen (there's even an unfunny slap at Los Angeles), and not helped by their lugubrious delivery. In looks and bearing alone, Hiddleston and Swinton are almost too perfectly cast as the nosferatic lovers—Hiddleston with his big liquid eyes and hushed, beautifully timbred voice, Swinton with her sharp, birdlike features and regally otherworldly air—but their posturingly arch, almost self-impressed readings (especially Swinton's) only highlight the dialogue's gracelessness. Speaking of Woody, there is present here—not only in the incessant name-dropping but in the ample durational space granted a set by psych-rock band White Hills and an (admittedly pretty great) performance by Lebanese chanteuse Yasmine Hamdan—what some might read as a comparable blurring of the line between reverent homage or sincere enthusiasm and self-flattering display of one's taste. ("God, I hope she doesn't become famous," declares an admiring Adam of Hamdan, "That would be the worst.")

So in sum, *Only Lovers* is (to echo Adam's disaffected declaration) something of a drag. Starved of actual aesthetic rewards, then, let's turn to one of the film's more interesting, though still underdeveloped, undercurrents: the fluid nature of authorship, which stands in intriguing contrast to Jarmusch's totemic brandishing of iconic names. "Why don't you let on?" Eve chides Marlowe early on, urging him to own up to his penning of the Shakespeare canon. "It would cause such delicious chaos." "I think the world has enough chaos right now," replies Kit—and later, mirroring Adam's rationale for apparently "giving" Schubert the adagio for one of his symphonies, he will concur that "getting the work out there," attached names aside, is the most important thing. Through equal parts design and conceptual confusion, Jarmusch sets



*Only Lovers Left Alive*

up his vampiric protagonists as both the secret source of some of our culture's greatest accomplishments and admiring, discerning critics of the best that we have attained, both participants and observers. And as they disclaim any truth as to their origins in their cheekily adopted monikers (Adam also travels as "Dr. Faust" while clandestinely infiltrating the hospital in scrubs and surgical mask, and Wright's "Dr. Watson" refers to him subsequently, and unfunnily, as "Dr. Strangelove" and "Dr. Caligari"), it is the work itself which stands—whether the music that Adam creates in his solitary studio, or Eve's readings from Marlowe on the soundtrack, or the onscreen performances that Jarmusch refuses to interrupt. Even as he is a distinctive artist in himself, Jarmusch has consistently demonstrated in his work an eagerness to incorporate the work and the culture of others—not to appropriate it, exploit it, or extrinsically augment his own work by it, but to admiringly display it, to make it available. If in *Only Lovers* Jarmusch's own art unfortunately falls flat, he at least consistently reminds us, within the very text of his films, that his is only one small facet of a vaster, shared artistic culture, and one that is very much alive.

# SHINE A LIGHT

*Ben Rivers and Ben Russell's *A Spell to Ward Off the Darkness**

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BY MICHAEL SICINSKI

With its very title, *A Spell to Ward Off the Darkness* is a film that announces itself as being in league with forces not entirely of this world. Nevertheless, its makers are two of the leading lights of contemporary experimental cinema precisely because of their pellucid examination of the world around them. Recently Ben Rivers has gotten the wider attention he has long deserved thanks to his 2011 feature *Two Years at Sea*, an extended portrait of off-the-grid Brit Jake Williams. Williams, like so many of Rivers' subjects, has opted out of postmodern capitalism in favour of a private, artisanal existence. Ben Russell, who like Rivers has worked in both features (2009's *Let Each One Go Where He May*) and the short form, is an inveterate globalist, having made films throughout the Americas, the Middle East, the South Pacific, and Europe. Russell and Rivers share an engagement with the history of ethnographic film, but only inasmuch as the critiques of its shortcomings and power relations have been fully internalized.

*A Spell to Ward Off the Darkness* finds their styles melding in the most fascinating ways. There has been a more reserved attitude in many of Rivers' films, a desire to hang back with patient curiosity, which is distinct from Russell's more agitated approach. What's more, Russell's films have often favoured group dynamics, or at least individuals losing their identities in tandem; Rivers has more often than not worked within a mode of solo portraiture. The resulting collaboration is a dialectical meld of these tendencies. One man (artist-musician Robert AA Lowe) is observed in three distinct situations: first, he participates in a commune on the island of Vormsi, Estonia; he then carves out an existence all alone in the Finnish wilderness; finally, he joins other musicians (Hunter Hunt-Hendrix of Liturgy, Nicholas McMaster of Krallice, and Weasal Walter of the Flying Luttenbachers) as the frontman of a Black Metal band. The resulting film is a triptych fully reflective of Rivers' and Russell's longtime concerns: how does one remain a part of society while carving out a space that is, in Heidegger's terms, true to one's ownmost possibility?



**Cinema Scope:** How did this project come about? Had you known ahead of time that you wanted a triptych, or to zero in on a single performer observed in different scenarios?

**Ben Rivers:** Ben and I have been friends now for many years, and in 2009 toured with a program of our films called *We Cannot Exist In This World Alone*. The program explored the overlapping themes in our work, and instigated discussion about making something together. Our films are formally pretty different, so it seemed like an exciting idea to push each other out of our ways of working. In the earliest stages we talked about the sublime, and what it means to live within that kind of landscape. We were particularly interested in Norway, as a landscape of out-of-control beauty that spawned Black Metal and Viking re-enactors. What is it about this landscape that encourages a desire to revisit pre-Christian pagan ways of being?

From here we thought about a character who might be searching for different ways of existing in this sublime landscape, and quickly decided upon the three-part structure of COMMUNE, SOLITUDE, and BLACK METAL, and we imagined these things happening in any order. There wasn't an answer or hierarchy among these attempts at achieving some kind of utopian moment. We already had the title, so we knew we were also thinking about magic. So three was an obvious choice for the number of different ways of being we wanted to explore. After some unexpected shenanigans we extended our locations beyond Norway to include Finland and Estonia, which turned out to be crucial to the development of the film.

**Scope:** These concepts you raise—utopia and the sublime—are particularly interesting with respect to history. Both of you have addressed these questions in your previous work in different ways, as you mention. But you've also located

these tendencies in many different circumstances and milieus, from folks living on the fringes of the developed world by choice, to people in the two-thirds world engaged in various forms of spiritual practice. In light of this, how did the two of you negotiate between the subjects' position in present-day geopolitics and their desire for something sublime or magical?

**Ben Russell:** Our own positions materialized first, of course. And to a very real extent, our subjects' positions are mirrors to our own efforts at finding a way forward through an increasingly messy and cynical European worldview. How and where can we locate meaning in a post-postmodern, post-utopian, post-religious (but still spiritual) space? We were drawn towards subjects who approached these awkward and cumbersome topics in their own lives, in their own practices; we ended up choosing to work with humans whose political and social and cultural perspectives were in fact directly informed by their own inquiries into some sort of deeper meaning. This is magic, this is transcendence, this is the utopian possibility of collective energy.

Our film is populated by people from Missouri, London, and Brooklyn, from Tampere, Tallinn, and Vormsi. We had architects, teachers, cooks, an ex-city councilman, artists, and activists on our roster. In the case of the musicians we chose (like Taraka and Nimai Larson from Prince Rama), each of them exhibited a totally meaningful commitment to embodiment—to producing a presence that begins as one body but quickly extends into the body of the audience as well. The Estonians we worked with had a totally different relationship to belief and to collective living than the Americans did, coming as they did out of a post-Soviet political ideology, where communism made capitalism difficult and religion all-but-impossible, and a syncretic kind of paganism was the one belief system that



A Spell to Ward Off the Darkness

seemed to weather the storm. In spite of their varied national backgrounds, our subjects all seemed to share in a kind of dark optimism—one that saw brightness and possibility in the sad chaos of global capitalism. It's perhaps a bit clichéd to say as much, but there is a radical kind of magic in all of this.

**Scope:** In this context, it stands to reason, Russell, that you link these questions to the body (or bodies), and to a corporeal experience that perhaps cannot exactly transcend histories or ideologies, but certainly can provide a kind of supplement or "indivisible remainder" to those systems of thought. Throughout *A Spell*, this question of bodily supplement is manifested in different ways, from the fact of communal living producing mutual contact zones (like the shared bathwater, or more radically, the story about the orgy with various fingers in random buttholes), to the direct contact with isolated nature, right up through the physical sonic blast of the Black Metal show. You both also seem to try to employ carefully modulated dynamics in your sound mix, to generate a similar tactile zone in the screening situation. Do you think there is a state of phenomenological impact that could ideally transport your audience to a place beyond concepts, into a more palpable kind of viewing?

**Russell:** This is certainly one of our ambitions with *A Spell*: to produce a cinema of embodiment and transformation, one that affects viewers in a present specific to the time/space that unfolds between projector and screen. I've had enough visceral experiences of/through both experimental and more commercially oriented media to propose that such a thing is indeed totally possible. But neither of us wants to create such a state if it means leaving a cultural or political framework behind.

The kind of radical pleasure that transcendence provides is really only meaningful if it happens in relation to concept, in

relation to a body that is not our own. It is vital to lose oneself, but it is equally important to find oneself again, to be able to rediscover our Self in relation to another Self—be it social, natural, etc. The last third of *A Spell* is a fairly strident declaration of this. We don't want to merely overwhelm our subjects. We want to return them to themselves. And then we want to do it again and again. It's no mistake that we took to referring to this section not only as BLACK METAL but also as PHENOMENOLOGY. In the COMMUNE and SOLITUDE sections, we aimed to arrive at immersion as well, albeit through two different sets of formal strategies that we saw as 'mirrors to the physical and ideological spaces that we were dealing with.'

**Scope:** This seems like a fairly straightforward utopian desire, which is not to say that it's easily achieved. I suppose I'd like to ask both of you why you decided on the feature-length format for this quest. Rivers, you made a recent featurette, *Slow Action* (2010), and both of you have made a recent feature-length film independently prior to this one. I realize you're both still making short films. But I'm wondering whether you're seeing a connection between this particular utopian drive, a spectatorial mode you're shooting for, and a specific relationship to film time.

**Russell:** One of the most important realizations that I had through the making of this film was that cinema was, in fact, one of our best vehicles for realizing utopia. During a conversation about his experience in the Santiago de Compostela pilgrimage, Tuomo (he's the Finn who tells the asshole story in the film, also the subject of our next collaboration) proposed that utopia only exists in the present, that it can only be realized in the now. Cinema is a medium that is likewise always arriving (as the future) and receding (as the past) simultaneous-

ly. It is only alive when we are alive with it, when we share our time and allow our space to be occupied. It can only happen as experience in the present, and its capacity to produce worlds unto itself positions cinema as a very real site for utopia. For Thomas More, Utopia was a no-place, a construct; taken positively, this is cinema defined.

I guess this is a roundabout way of answering the question of duration, which is different than the question of time, although the latter certainly helps produce the weight of the former. In *Let Each One Go Where He May*, the experience of body-within-body that I was aiming for was made possible because of the amount of indexical time that the spectator spent with the subject, spent in the time of my film. The influence of drone music there is real, using “long time” to change the viewer’s time. Duration made this possible. In *A Spell*, we created three different film-times that each lasted around 30 minutes, long enough to draw our viewers in, to produce the present that we wanted.

Having said as much, I don’t think that either Ben or I set out to make long or short films, much less features or shorts. Our films tend to be the length that they need to be. Working with producers and within non-independent funding schemes can sometimes change this a bit as the feature model is the fundable one, but happily this hasn’t really been the case with *A Spell*.

**Scope:** To return to the idea of collaboration, I wanted to ask about the ways your own styles of filmmaking are reflected

in the final product. It almost seemed reverse-Hegelian, like COMMUNE showed the two of you melding your approaches in a very deliberate way, SOLITUDE (with some key-moment exceptions) seeming to draw more directly on Rivers’ efforts like *This Is My Land* (2006) and *Origin of the Species* (2008), and BLACK METAL representing a kind of radical recontextualization of manoeuvres Russell explored in *Black and White Trypps Number Three* (2007). Of course, the deeper one looks at it, these initial responses are complicated. But does this reaction in any way correspond to how the two of you conceived the film?

**Rivers:** Not really. *A Spell* is a film that we collaborated on entirely, from beginning to end. The concept, the form, and the structure were arrived at with total participation from each of us. We never filmed or edited anything without the other being present, and while you’re right in thinking that the work points towards our own varied tendencies, you’re getting closer to the truth of the film when you sense a deeper reading pulsing just below that surface. And people who don’t know our earlier work but have seen this film thus far (we’ve had a few “work-in-progress” screenings) seem to have a much more complete experience of it, one that is not weighed down by a search for signs of the single authors within the collaborative duo. I wonder if this means that the unfamiliar audience is our ideal set of eyes and ears? Neither of us are willing to stick to this, as there are still a great number of audiences ahead of us.

The advertisement features a black and white photograph of a person with dark, spiky hair, wearing a patterned pajama top with stars and stripes, and white shorts. The person is in a dynamic, flexing pose with arms raised and legs spread. To the left of the image, the word "PLEASURE DOME" is written in large, bold, block letters. The "P", "L", "E", "A", "S", "U", and "R" are in a lighter, greyish font, while "DOME" is in a large, solid black font. Below this, the text "Presenting experimental media art in Toronto since 1989" is written in a smaller, sans-serif font. To the right of the image, there is a vertical logo consisting of a stylized letter 'D' inside a square frame, with the website "www.pdome.org" written vertically next to it.

# THE MAN WHO LEFT HIS NOTES ON FILM

*Norbert Pfaffenbichler*



*A Masque of Madness*

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BY CHRISTOPH HUBER

*"The most terrifying image is a clown in the night."*  
—Boris Karloff

A phone rings. But nobody picks up. Instead, there are shots of empty rooms, corridors, and stairways. A handful of inserts in close-up conjure the feeling of sudden exit, things left in a hurry: a phonograph still running (without sound), leftover food, cigarette butts in an ashtray. Or have they been deemed

unimportant after long deliberation? Next, a cut to shadows on the wall: a hanged man's feet. Over it, superimposition(s) of the title(s): *Notes on Film 6-B. Monologue 2. A Masque of Madness*. "Starring Boris Karloff"—the filmmaker, Norbert Pfaffenbichler, is, with a characteristic touch of humour, simply credited as "ghoul." After this macabre introduction a lo-res image of Big Ben follows, bells ringing like a reminder that it is time to reconsider not only time itself, but other basic modules of commercial cinema as well—space and narrative, continuity and identity, in their usual means of constitution will be presently (and concurrently) de- and reconstructed. The film's first mini-symphony of absurd terror re-edited from a horror star's half-century career emerges as a preparatory montage of Karloff in various screen incarnations interacting with himself: fleeing and watching, following and scheming. The

actor's appearance and age at times vary radically from shot to shot, the flashes of an underground conspiracy anchored by Karloff's most famous screen character, Frankenstein's monster, in a central image. He is an iconic presence, grotesque and touching, scaled down amidst an apparatus of antiquated, huge mechanisms—a monstrous human cog in the machine of film history.

Some kind of baroque masterpiece, *A Masque of Madness* confirms Pfaffenbichler, born in 1967, as the most fascinating Austrian avant-garde filmmaker of his generation, its premiere in Locarno's *Histoire(s) du cinéma* sidebar another overdue step back into A-Festival territory. (Two other films of his *Notes on Film* series had been at Venice: *Conference [Notes on Film 05]* in 2011, when the Orizzonti section was still ambitious, and, in 2002, *notes on film 01 else*.) Intriguingly, the starting point for Pfaffenbichler's partly ominous, partly hilarious Karloff roundelay also offers an ideal opportunity for a career-consideration flashback, as it can be seen as a more refined version of Pfaffenbichler's devil-may-care, cyberpunkish student film debut *Wirehead* (1997), co-directed with Timo Novotny (the two subsequently collaborated on visuals for Austrian electro-rockers Sofa Surfers, though the tour life soon wore Pfaffenbichler out). *Wirehead* is a 22-minute mash-up about an illegal intruder's journey into an industrial warehouse wasteland where wireheads directly plug themselves into a delirious stream of images dominated by parodic commercial noise: a pretext to splice in tests and exercises made during the university course, from cartoon tributes to Looney Tunes and John Kricfalusi to vector-graphics and ego-shooter feeds. Kurt Kren modestly presides over the proceedings at a monitor bank: Pfaffenbichler studied with him and recalls his lessons sometimes consisted of Kren wordlessly presenting entire films by Jörg Buttgereit or Tsukamoto Shinya, whose *Tetsuo* work clearly left an imprint on *Wirehead*. "Please make your choice" is the recurring mantra spouted by a featureless female animation on a simulated touch-button screen, inviting us to click to the next digression, the next loop Pfaffenbichler and Novotny chose to insert. Novotny may have remixed Michael Glawogger's *Megacities* (1998) into a feature "music documentary" called *Life in Loops* (2006), but the zany loop structure of *Wirehead*, ultimately closing in on itself and short-circuiting its titular hero, is an announcement of Pfaffenbichler's alleged leitmotif, still amply explored: "Difference and repetition."

For a few years, Pfaffenbichler pursued it in collaborative abstract animations—up to the minimalist masterpiece *36* (2001), a two-minute essence of the era's Austrian Abstract movement, co-directed with Lotte Schreiber. A work of astonishing conceptual clarity, *36* presents three differently shaped and sized segments, each animated by a distinct kind of movement (binary changes of line-patterns, hallucinatory oscillating colour fields, a crawling countdown square): a conflation of abstract painting, bulky early video games, and geometrical film that elegantly produces perception overload with minimal means. The next year, Pfaffenbichler's first solo work, *notes on film 01 else*, inaugurated the fortuitous cycle that has occupied him since, apart from a few commissioned works; he has also shown in museums and galleries, and has been active as a cura-

tor. True to its appropriately ambiguous moniker, the *Notes on Film* series reconsiders pieces of film history from various perspectives by rewriting them conceptually; it has been progressively and playfully expanding, all the while taking surprising turns. *else* still combines graphic elements with images: the bottom of the screen is occupied by signs, the block letters IF transforming hieroglyphically to form strange patterns, sometimes coalescing into numbers or words, including OR, THEN and, of course, ELSE (more loops). Above, five small split-screens allow a "cubist" look at a woman alternately meeting and resisting the viewer's gaze: a concise rendering of a cinema of attraction (and withdrawal), inspired by a scene from Paul Czinner's fine Schnitzler adaptation *Fräulein Else* (1928) that fascinated Pfaffenbichler but proved too short for intended use—so he shot his own material.

As he also did by necessity for his experimental feature debut, *Notes on Film 02* (2006), the most demanding of Pfaffenbichler's exercises in difference and repetition. Its core is a seven-minute short—just one minute longer than *else*—stretched out to 96 minutes via diligent alphanumeric variation. Drawing on the modernist ennui of Antonioni's cycle of alienation and Godard's *Alphaville* (1965), Pfaffenbichler found an ideal intermediary in Robert Frank's shorter *OK End Here* (1963) to forge a study of a disaffected couple, only that after the first scene finishes, the same scene is replayed differently, eventually followed by the second scene—only to rewind again. Another series of expanding loops, *Notes on Film 02* adds another scene on each go-through, while the previous ones play out in sometimes obvious, sometimes hardly noticeable variations, until in the final round you see the last scene for the first time and thus the "whole" short. But the whole idea (not just) of wholeness has been warped out of recognition via difference and repetition. After all, you have seen 26 possible versions of the first scene by then, 25 of the second, etc.—only scene four, a shot of a TV with the opening credits of *SpongeBob SquarePants*, the title tune blaring, dubbed in German, disruptively amidst many silences, stays eternal. (Sensibly a big fan of the cartoon series, Pfaffenbichler has also exhibited a marvellous triple-self-portrait as Squidwards Tentacles.) Although in the end the characters get lost amidst depopulated high-rise-architecture à la Antonioni, this melancholy modernist work exuded a glimmer of hope: each sequence a new option, a possibility of radical freedom opposed to the determinism in realistic disguise dominating Austrian festival cinema in the last decade.

Subsequently, Pfaffenbichler switched to found footage, beginning with the structuralist milestone *Mosaik mécanique* (*Notes on Film 03*) (2007), which spreads Charlie Chaplin's one-reeler *A Film Johnny* (1914) over a Cinemascope screen, the 96 shots (plus head and tail leaders) arranged as parallel loops in a 14x7 grid pulsating for the original duration of nine minutes. But (film) time has been refashioned into space, the images coexisting democratically, set free from linear or narrative constraints. So is the spectator's gaze, the material suddenly "legible" in all directions, forming a garden of forking paths. (I have hitherto unjustly ignored Pfaffenbichler's sturdy soundtracks, usually by electronica experts, but Bernhard

Lang's 98 polyphonic pianola loops, each synchronized to one of the film grids, warrants special mention for its uncanny suspense; it is also worth noting that while *Notes on Film 02* loses much of its impact when not viewed in a theatre, *Mosaïk mécanique* is literally impossible to experience on a small screen.) After these lofty heights, *Intermezzo (Notes on Film 04)* (2011), combining a painful Chaplin slapstick loop with angry guitar noise, feels like a minor doodle, though one clearly animated by Pfaffenbichler's distinct sensibility—a clear concept, a keen sense for practically and theoretically resonant images, a forceful arrangement intermittently betraying a sense of humour somewhere between absurdist and pitch black.

Made the same year, *Conference* is another major short: eight minutes of Hitler, as reenacted by 65 actors over the decades, edited as an essay on the grotesque, in both the funny and eerie senses. A most recognizable figure just via toothbrush moustache and slick, parted hair, der Führer is second only to Jesus as far as filmic accounts of actual persons go. As Pfaffenbichler drives home, the line between serious and parodic presentation has long been rendered meaningless—Romuald Karmakar, who made his own ingenious early fake home movie about Hitler's rascally early years in Munich, *Eine Freundschaft in Deutschland* (1985), once referred to Hitler interpretations as *Kasperltheater*, a Punch and Judy show. Pfaffenbichler shares the sentiment: "The more authentic a Hitler imitation strains to be, the more ridiculous it seems to me." *Conference* stresses the aspect of caricature—there's even an unexpected choice moment with French comedy genius Louis de Funès—but the horror is never far away, as asserted by Lang's stuttering soundtrack loops. The absurd atmosphere is reinforced by Pfaffenbichler's construction, trapping this ever-popular, clichéd image of evil in a vicious cycle, working with images reshot in black-and-white from a monitor to give the material a uniform look: almost exclusively close-ups of Hitler, eternally mismatched yet unchangeably recognizable, engaging in ever more heated debate with himself or a doppelgänger (or rather *wiedergänger*: revenant). The great dictator in a hall of distorting mirrors: a series of reflections, at some point even posited as a film watched by yet another Hitler.

Inverting one aspect of *Conference*, Pfaffenbichler has expanded the *Notes on Film* with a dumbfounding diptych of features this year. Instead of one character played by numerous actors, these two heartfelt tributes—one silent, one sound film—to a genre in general and two horror movie stars in particular, feature one actor in all parts. The first, *A Messenger from the Shadows (Notes on Film 06 A. Monologue 01)*, finds an ideal subject in Lon Chaney, whose mastery of disguises made him the "man of a thousand faces": a one-person play starring the multitudes of a splintered persona (Chaney's predilection for the grotesque seems furthermore downright Pfaffenbichlerian). Using at least one shot from each of the 46 still-extant Chaney films he could find, Pfaffenbichler crafts his own phantom ride through impossible spaces created by conjoining different movies through classical montage, given to crafting his own meta-nightmare to Lang's mutating soundtrack, replete with atmospheric introduction and a series of battles, conspiracies, secret messages, impossible love

affairs, and deadly, delirious acts. Meanwhile, Chaney, only interacting with himself, however disfigured, lends a poignant sense of tragic loneliness to the proceedings, as well as creating all kinds of often perversely comic complications in manifold shades between autoeroticism and murderous/suicidal self-loathing. With his own sense of perverse comedy, Pfaffenbichler inserts a lengthy succession of intertitles mid-stretch: more notes on film, also a linearized equivalent to those unvaried black patches in the otherwise oscillating grid of *Mosaïk mécanique*. More than a structuralist ruse, this telling conference of titles also proves a respite before the appropriately hysterical fits of the rousing showdown. By then, it has long been clear that for Chaney there's no escape from the surreally expanding labyrinth of horror (movies), only the *Morel's Invention*-like choice to reenact a bizarre dance of death—into eternity. The most sinister punch line comes with his inevitable resurrection.

Which brings to mind one (or two, possibly even three) of Boris Karloff's finest performances as aristocratic twins—the evil one kills the good one, then impersonates him—for the great, neglected director Roy William Neill in *The Black Room* (1935), guided by the motto and curse "Principio et finem similia" on the coat-of-arms of the baronial family. But the title quote for *A Masque of Madness* comes from *Bedlam* (1946), superbly directed by the misrepresented Mark Robson, but notably one of the most personal projects for legendary, cultivated RKO B-horror producer Val Lewton, who was on the same wavelength as Karloff, opting for lasting suggestions over quick shocks. Weary of monotonous work, Karloff preferred the term "terror" to distance himself from horror's repulsive side, a word that annoyed him especially in relation to *Bedlam*: "It's not a horror picture. It's a historical picture," he would insist. "Mr. Karloff has great love and respect for Mr. Lewton as the man who rescued him from the living dead and restored, so to speak, his soul," one contemporary interview piece relates. But for all his sophistication, Karloff—whose famous stage name was itself part of the film persona created by and for a man named William Henry Pratt—rarely could escape being typecast: "You can't change a whole lifetime with one picture," he muses self-reflexively in Peter Bogdanovich's *Targets* (1968). "If my Lord will but give me the day and hour of the fête... I will prepare a masque of madness that will set you howling," proves providential no less, with the proceedings progressing like an entire doomed, but high-spirited carnival doubling as a schizo-horror-trip.

Not only does the addition of sound add another dimension, the canvas is considerably widened by sheer volume: half a century of cinema, presided over by Karloff in more than 170 incarnations, miraculously changing age, race, language, and even gender. His titular red-wig drag turn in "The Mother Muffin Affair," a 1966 episode of *The Girl from U.N.C.L.E.*, remains the most bizarre presence, several monsters and especially the endearing Karloff puppet from 1967's old-school-tribute-animation bash *Mad Monster Party* notwithstanding. Space expands more wildly, colour becomes a major element, with laboratory scenes from Karloff's many sci-fi-horror crossovers lovingly rearranged as pure psychedelic passages, before

giving way to the genre's inherent escalating madness: electric charges and hallucinatory bleeps accompany the resolution "to destroy all obstacles in the name of progress" on "our way into the future." The flight of Icarus is invoked inversely when things go unavoidably bad, and a rapid succession of Karloffs falling from great heights includes a spontaneously combusting creature. Another fizzles out robotically on the floor: Karloff was identified with the man-made monster after his star-making turn (billed as "?") in James Whale's *Frankenstein* (1931), and artificial creatures abound in *A Masque of Madness*, but it hardly mitigates the schizophrenia, with Karloff doubling as creator, including Baron Frankenstein twice (though once voicing a puppet named Boris [von] instead of Victor).

*A Masque of Madness* keeps returning to various sub-themes from Karloff's career, subverting meanings by design—its Karloff-union is automatically Brechtian, as is Pfaffenbichler's cinema in a way: experimental and popular. But there's also witty directorial intervention to contribute to the complications: as Karloff demands more energy, out comes the German dub—"Mehr Energie!" Other language dubs come in repeatedly, the subtitles once rendering an entirely different dialogue. Egyptian Karloff's spirit as *The Mummy* (1932) seems to take possession of American-Native Karloff, suddenly chanting along: "Ankh-es-en-Amon." The Wurdalakaroff from Mario Bava's *Black Sabbath* (1963) miraculously walks into and out of colour. Can he create "A World of My Design," as one chapter heading promises? Others announce Frankenstein-like resurrection ("Lazarus II"), insane imbroglio ("The Seed of Evil, Private Devils, Foolish Daydreams, Pangs of Amnesia and Oriental Magic"), even resolution ("A Game of Death"), but it's arrested development—each is labelled "Chapter One." Like "Quizzical Ways," a claim asserted amusingly and structurally, for example, with excursions into nature documentary thanks to experts from a Karloff-narrated mondo movie about a place "where every form of life has been extinguished since time immemorial" (although you see and hear birds) and "the natives eke out an existence at the edge of a sinister swamp." Is this the eternity of cinema? Karloff's rhetorical question from Edgar G. Ulmer's *The Black Cat* (1934) "Are we not both the living dead?" and other recognizable moments may conjure a feeling of sudden absence in the cinematic memory—where's Bela Lugosi?—to be quickly filled by whatever Karloff. And while even animals are allowed this time, as well as the unforgettable "Little Lost Robot" soulfully traversing cheap tinfoil corridors in Chapter One, Karloff ultimately makes for a more complex Pfaffenbichler-presence than Chaney, because he registers more strongly as an antagonist. Before he must succumb to failure and leaves all his notes (on film) "in the hope that in better hands than mine, some good may come out of them," he tries to rebel, seemingly both against himself and against the films he's trapped in, near the end literally shooting down the hall of mirrors. As if he could break free through an act of creation or destruction, or both—or maybe just by putting on an astonishing act, for as Karloff lies dead in the rain in the end, the loops on the soundtrack suggest it's him releasing us from mass hypnosis.

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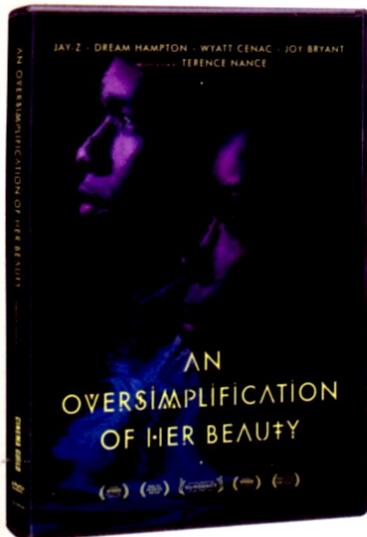
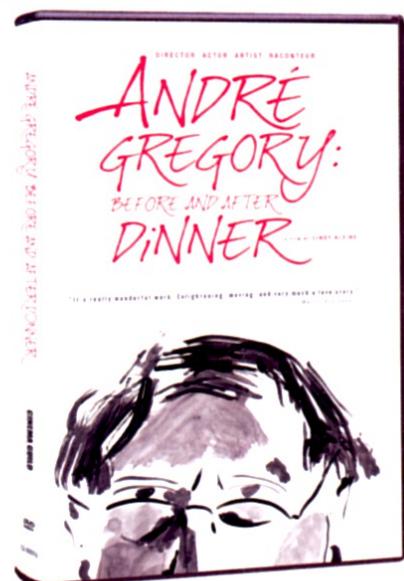
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# CAMILLE HENROT

*A Hunter-Gatherer During a Time of Collective “Grosse Fatigue”*

“Ideas are a complete system within us, resembling a natural kingdom, a sort of flora, of which the iconography will one day be outlined by some man who will perhaps be accounted a madman.”

—Honoré de Balzac, *Louis Lambert*, 1832

“How, in A.D. 1988, is it that human ingenuity has been unable, firstly via science in its many fields and secondly via believers with their various credos, to arrive at agreed definitive forms when, to general current perception the universe is a singular phenomenon...IS THERE A BLACK HOLE  
MEGATRUTH AT THE CENTER OF THE 20C TRAJECTORY...?”

—John Latham & Ian Macdonald-Munro, 1988

Archive fever hasn't really left us, yet it's been increasingly tempered by a sense of exasperation: not enough money, not enough space, too much physical material, too much digital information, too much time required and energy spent. Which archives? Film archives for one, but also a wide-ranging span that includes natural history museums and other swelling repositories of species, specimens, collections, artworks, etc. For posterity's sake, access is crucial and the collecting evermore ethical and philosophical, as is its interpretation. (One

can easily speculate on the reasons why, aesthetic and otherwise, James Benning has been making a film at the formidable Natural History Museum in Vienna—bliss for vitrine fetishists—and Sokurov has been doing the same in the storied stock rooms of the Louvre.) This year's Venice Biennale, curated by precocious multi-tasker Massimiliano Gioni, Artistic Director of the Nicola Trussardi Foundation as well as Associate Director and Director of Exhibitions at the New Museum, bore both a relevant and obvious title, “The Encyclopedic Palace.”



*Camille Henrot, Grosse Fatigue (detail), 2013. Video (color, sound). © Camille Henrot, courtesy the artist and kamel mennour, Paris, France.*

Relevant because taxonomy has been radically redefined in our age and continues to stutter in paradoxical limbo. Its tools and mechanisms are in constant flux, updated incessantly, with the notion of the archive and the catalogue rendered instantaneous, pushed and pulled between the public and the personal. This is the personal as public phenomenon, the public made personal by design, and perhaps altogether less scientific or reliable than in the past, i.e., Wikipedia rather than encyclopedia: knowledge blurred by opinion. Of course, objectivity has eluded most fields of scientific study for reasons that are as obvious as they are insidious. Truth according to whom?

New York-based French artist Camille Henrot won the Silver Lion at Venice for best young promising artist for her “encyclopedic” video *Grosse Fatigue*, a huge popular and critical hit, and a work many considered the perfect encapsulation of the Biennale itself. A summation of curatorial impetus (refracted through the commission), but also of the history of the world in all of its colourful deviations, *Grosse Fatigue* is heady, steeped in creationist myths from a vast array of cultures, whose beginnings are nary the same. And nor are their deaths. A prolific, multidisciplinary artist, whose work ranges from sculpture and drawing to film and video, Henrot demonstrates a fervent fascination with the collection and circulation of objects, as well as symbols of the past and their estranged, present-day applications. (Her elegant, uncanny *ikebana* sculptures—titled *Est-il possible d'être révolutionnaire et d'aimer les fleurs?*—were one of the big hits of last year's Paris Triennial, *Intense Proximité*, itself a bulimic display of knowledge and example of excess largely cast through a number of august anthropological and ethnographic explorations.)

*Grosse Fatigue* emerged from the artist's fellowship at the Smithsonian Institution, where she dove into creationist myths spanning a wide range of religions, epochs, and geographic expanses, exhuming a multitude of artifacts and their legends. The video paradoxically partakes in the desire for totalizing cosmological knowledge and in the state of saturation, indeed exhaustion, that results from that subjective quest—one that, of course, extends to art-making itself and its critical analysis. An addictive mix of beats (yes beats!) and anthropology, *Grosse Fatigue* is video art as exhilarating nervous breakdown with an underlying plangent tone: a hymn or a lament, and/or an avowal of solitude in search of answers.

Like a literal embodiment of our anxious, knowledge-thirsty contemporary moment, the video is comprised of a succession of windows and folders opening and closing on a computer screen revealing a dizzying array of taxonomic information. Seventies slam poetry-style narration, written in collaboration with poet Jacob Bromberg and percussively scored by DJ Joakim Bouaziz (Henrot's frequent collaborator) describes an increasingly breathless excursion through the history of the universe. “In the beginning there was...” and was, and was, suggesting an ad infinitum host of possibilities for the birth, life, and death of this complicated world we inhabit. Replete with cryptic quotes embedded in its bold spoken-word delivery (a fitting affront to minimalism considering its maximalist endeavour), *Grosse Fatigue* is an idiosyncratic mix of popular

myth, anthropological findings, intellectual pilfering and citation, interface aesthetics, and a resolutely populist idiom. Its contradictions cohere around an ordering principle that deceptively defies its form. While each successive window suggests moving images that are “found” and reconstituted as if through a search engine, *Grosse Fatigue* is not a found-footage work in any conventional sense. In fact, it's not a found-footage film at all. The footage is mostly original and shot by the artist herself, though—as attested to by the ubiquitous image of Toronto's infamous shearling-coat-sporting Ikea Monkey—a few were sourced via the internet and appear on a computer monitor that comprises their alterable cosmos. But the windows upon windows of information, interspersed with more documentary-like footage of the conservation facilities at the Smithsonian, suggest a seemingly endless *mise en abyme*, which, especially given its context and subject matter, plays into a larger dialogue (equally evident and oblique) about the nature of artifacts, facsimiles, and worth (especially of objecthood in our age of de-materialization), inside and outside of the art and museum worlds.

Employing images of disjunctive mimicry as a clash of cultures, and hinting at the fickleness and surface polish of fashion and its anthropological implications (nail art and the *zeitgeist*), *Grosse Fatigue* demonstrates a conceptualist approach and palette that harnesses the aesthetics of the web (images that are perpetually minimized, maximized, overlapped, dragged), sometimes with footage that infers the cinema. Its multi-grid form of constantly moving images, we know, is routinely used to watch works of cinema as blocks of information removed from its material properties. If *Grosse Fatigue* ultimately signals an impossible search for harmonizing a totalizing knowledge, it does so through an avowal of solitude that, not unlike the communal act of watching a film projected in a cinema, seeks solace in a comforting, collective belief system and through the potential for thrilling discovery—one that both propels and placates a rapidly beating heart.

On the occasion of *Grosse Fatigue*'s inclusion in TIFF's Future Projections program, Camille Henrot graciously took the time to answer some questions while in the midst of preparing her large solo exhibition, *Cities of Ys*, set to open at the New Orleans Museum of Art in early October.

**Cinema Scope:** The title, *Grosse Fatigue*, has already become iconic or emblematic of our contemporary mood. Did you have this title in mind at the outset of the project, or did it emerge as you conducted your research and presumably became overwhelmed with the inexhaustibility of it all?

**Camille Henrot:** Yes, it was a period in my life when everything felt very heavy and weighing. To take on the whole history of humanity is already a burden. The burden of the history of the universe is absurd by definition. When we think about the history of the universe we think about the beginning, the creative energy, but what's important is what comes after...I wanted to insist on the un-glorious aspect of it in the title. Fatigue is mentioned in a lot of creation myths. It's the



Camille Henrot, *Grosse Fatigue* (detail), 2013. Video (color, sound). © Camille Henrot, courtesy the artist and kamel mennour, Paris, France.

loss of energy, the entropy principle, which is the founding principle of the creation of the universe.

**Scope:** Why tackle creationist myths today? What significance do they hold vis-à-vis our present-day moment?

**Henrot:** Today there is a lot of interest in the idea of the end of human civilization. This feeling probably emerges due to the virtual era and its “de-materialization.” But thinking about the end returns us to the beginning, the creation of a world. The novel by Jules Verne, *The New Adam*, tells the story of the disappearance of our civilization, and how the survivors become the new “first men.” As a personal point of view, it amuses me to think of creation myths in relation to the creation of an artist and take this as another version of a creation myth, with lightness. Origin and authenticity are often fetishized and used in ideology. So I wanted to approach this subject by criticizing this compulsion, without removing its beauty.

I think that the Smithsonian posits a rather interesting point of view because their approach is really open and thoughtful. I like the idea that in the Department of Anthropology at the Museum of Natural History, there is a “globalization” specialist, Joshua Bell, who wrote a text on braiding baskets called “beginnings and ends.” He is also present in the film, wearing blue gloves to show some Melanesian objects.

**Scope:** What were some of the most surprising, baffling, or spectacular discoveries made while at the Smithsonian?

**Henrot:** The Smithsonian database. While preparing for my stay in DC and researching the database, I was obsessively making screen captures of the strange combinations of images that were appearing on my computer when making “selections” of things I wanted to view. It was permanent chaos and

cacophony, and I felt as if the history of the universe could be written with this spirit in mind.

**Scope:** While the video makes clever use of the internet form—its screensaver, windows, in short, its interface as a display-cum-montage of images—can you tell us about the actual images and footage? Did you largely shoot them? Deceptively, we are prone to imagine *Grosse Fatigue* as a found-footage work because of its structural framework (as a recycler or refresher of images), and yet it’s far more intricate than that.

**Hénrot:** All of the moving images were shot specifically for the film. The only found images in the film are the wide-eyed white cats and the popular image of the Ikea Monkey who gets minimized into the shot of the rocket ship. I had prepared tons of folders with very crazy categories of found images from the web for the film, such as nail art, dead animals, decorated eggs, eye irritation, naked bodies, artists drawing in bed, writers writing while standing, water drops, anorexia, bicolour-eyed cats, and yet I only used maybe five percent of these images.

**Scope:** Has cinema’s role in how we see and experience the world changed as we’ve increasingly moved from a physical to a virtual taxonomy?

**Henrot:** During my research at the Smithsonian, I made lists of books that were interesting to me. One of them, *Arénaire Archimedes*, was interesting for a large number of reasons. It describes computers as being calculating machines. The computer supports the excessive size of the world (meaning the sheer quantity but also the diversity of views, practices, and the multiplication of individuals, along with the visual and textual traces they generate). The curator in charge of the medicine and science division at the National Museum

of American History, Peggy Kidwell, gave me a text called "Joining the Network of Ideas, Impact of Digital Information on the General Workflow of Knowledge." It was on hypermedia and how the computer window has been designed to leverage the possibilities of assimilation and connection. The concept of hyper-media seemed very interesting, and I haven't found any other system of visual expression that can effectively express the issue of flow and disparity of information we face as humans with the internet.

It creates an order, but the multiplication of knowledge means that the order can only be personal and subjective. This makes sense because that subjective order can include any combination of ideas, whereas with a rational and objective system there will always be blind spots, which it cannot include because it would seem contradictory.

**Scope:** Can you discuss your choice of music for *Grosse Fatigue*? You've used bold music in the past—I'm thinking of your film *Le Songe de Poliphile* (2011) in particular—which is rhythmically propulsive but also partakes in a more subconscious reality, such as fear or erotic impulses.

**Henrot:** I'm very lucky to have collaborated with Joakim for a very long time, and he understands how to make the film become a very visceral experience through music.

I'm inspired by avant-garde cinema of the '30s that refers to music and painting as models, not literature and theatre. I wrote my master's thesis on slow motion, relating it to a Gutai painting and Asian action films, so I've always been very pre-occupied by cinema as a "total art" and my very first films were music videos.

It was my aim for the film to reflect the anxiety generated by the open nature of the world and its excessive dimension. I decided to use hip hop because hip-hop beats have a universal planetary dimension that seems appropriate. It brings forth ideas of expense and excess (in the way George Bataille thinks of them).

I'm a big fan of hip hop music. I was in Cotonou in Benin last November, and the swimming pool at my hotel was used by a school class during the day. A kid was afraid to dive and another kid told him, to help him jump, "Do you think Wiz Khalifa would be afraid?" I then considered the origin of rap, spoken word poetry, the rhythm of language, and how we record voices. I was interested in a voice that could oscillate between conviction and vulnerability. The voice is that of Akwetey Orraca-Tetteh (part of the musical group Dragon of Zynth) who is also an actor. We had to work very hard with the recording since it was important to do it all in one take. Joakim designed music with the idea of minimal hip hop in mind, akin to the Pharrell Williams song "Drop It Like It's Hot," which is my favourite hip-hop song.

**Scope:** Is *Grosse Fatigue* your personal history of the universe pieced together from an accumulation of shared, even conflicting knowledge? How did you parse and privilege your research? And in this instance, what significance does the computer display have?

**Henrot:** Yes, that would be a good description. The question of focusing and eliminating was central to keeping my sanity. I knew that I would go crazy if I did not restrain the scope of the

research, and yet I had the intuitive idea that only a sincere, all encompassing strategy would be an interesting project. This was something I then had to accept and give shape to.

Knowledge compulsion is also connected to narcissism and loneliness, that's why I had this idea that the film should have a masturbation scene.

I was so overwhelmed by images and ideas of connections at night that I thought I was schizophrenic and started looking at the Wikipedia page about schizophrenia. That's how these pages came to be included in the film.

I was relieved when I was able to integrate so much of the vulnerability of my own research (the crazy and messy parts of it) in a visual system that would be coherent with the subject. It was not very easy to explain my project to people and I really had to fight to get appointments or get access to things (especially the Natural History Museum, which was also the museum that was the most all-encompassing and therefore the most interesting to my research). It became very obvious that the "general" and "too broad" characteristic of my research was opposite to the scientific research process which focuses on a certain species within a certain genus, within a certain family, within a certain order and so on.

**Scope:** How can we even fathom harmonizing all human knowledge without losing our sanity?

**Henrot:** If you think about harmonizing all human knowledge you already have lost your sanity. But by sanity here, we of course mean rationality.

"The human mind has two irreconcilable fundamental aspirations. One is expressed by our language through a very significant image. It is understood as a synonym of the words 'to know,' 'to grasp' [*saisire*], and 'to comprehend' [*comprendre*]. We can only understand as a totality what we receive to hold in our hands." *History of Speculative thought* (1896), Jonas Cohn (my translation).

Our desire to encompass all can only be experienced in a very humble proportion: our hands. That's why hands are a 'repetitive pattern in my film. But enlarging the circle and putting more and more within it is a desire at the very origin of our human need. Writing an exhaustive history of the world is a violent way to take hold of it, to somehow "own" it. Preservation and conservation are paradoxically acts of destruction, and this classification anticipates the end of the world as we know it. This really resonates with Lévi-Strauss' idea that at the root of anthropology is the end of mankind. The collection may allow certain species and certain cultures to survive, but is the notion of being saved by science actually precipitating our own destruction?

A harmonized universe...it's a very scary thing to imagine. A world where everything has a meaning, and every gesture a cause. It's a world with no possibility of poetry and conversation. No space between right and wrong. It would not be a nice place to live in because there would be no outside, no escape. But the truth is that we all have this ambivalent nostalgia of what Pierre Teilhard de Chardin calls the omega point, from one to many. There was a moment when everything that lived was fish, and we all have an intuitive memory of this.

# HARRY TOMICEK

*In Praise of Moments Past*



It wasn't exactly a secret that Harry Tomicek, Austria's most original contemporary thinker-writer on all matters cinema and life, also makes films—"Philosoph und Filmgestalter" is the way he once famously described himself in a capsule biography. Don't even try to translate *Filmgestalter*: "film creator" would be too literal, "film shaper" too workman-like. *Gestalter* has an applied arts-and-crafts touch but, paradoxically in this context, also an aroma of refinement, aloofness, and serenity, with a marvellous hint of irony, flamboyance, and self-deprecation—which perfectly sums up Tomicek's particularities and paradoxes.

Now the thing is, for most people, "Philosoph und Filmgestalter" must have sounded a bit like a strange joke, as so far no film of his has ever been shown publicly, and only a few (a very, very few) trusted souls were granted even a glimpse at his creations in the making. That changed on Sunday, June 2 between noon and 2:00pm at Vienna's Künstlerhaus, where its recently elected president, master-maverick Michael Pilz, presented a screening of five easy pieces by Tomicek. Later in the afternoon, the rains started to get heavier; by the evening, Austria was essentially cut off from the rest of the world, with all main

thoroughfares made impassable by a deluge of Biblical dimensions, rendering the alpine nation an island in the midst of the European landmass for a number of hours. Something so apocalyptic felt only right after the Tomicek-revelation—for that's what this handful of films was, nothing less.

Among Austrian and FRG cinephiles, Tomicek is revered as insatiably hungry, extremely educated, wryly partisan-minded in his judgements, as well as an outstanding stylist well versed in the classics and moderns of literature; it's difficult not to think of Sterne, Chamisso, and Simon when reading his texts. Save for Helmut Färber, Peter Nau, and Hans Schifferle, there's no German-language adventurer of film-thought alive who even approaches Tomicek's excellence. Which doesn't mean that he's widely published—*au contraire*. Tomicek never really made a career out of his art: he remains a steadfastly private gentleman who writes solely for his pleasure. Tomicek's main publisher was the Austrian Filmmuseum, whose poet laureate he became during the Kubelka-Kohnlechner era. The greatest part of his writing consists of highly evocative, epigrammatic liner-notes for the cinémathèque's programs, printed back then in small type and sight-challenging black-on-brown on

thick, crispy wrapping paper. Needless to say that these poster-like, pin-board-epoch ephemera are now cult objects, collectibles that perfectly preserve the two Peters' monkishly magisterial attitude towards films and their presentation: hard wooden seats to remind you that cinema isn't (only) about fun; no running times on the schedules (the film takes as long as it takes, and if you can't take the last subway back, so be it, for that's what it takes); no live accompaniment for silents (distracts from the images); and most certainly no subtitles (cinema is not about stories but compositions, structures, sounds, impressions); only the true devotees survive. (How frivolous, in their effervescent sensuality, Tomicek's texts looked in comparison!) Besides the liner notes, Tomicek also wrote several book(let)s to accompany retrospectives considered of particular importance for the Austrian Filmmuseum, its vision of cinema and, therewith, its mission: the ones on Ozu Yasujiro, Humphrey Jennings, and Robert Gardner feel like his key long-form achievements.

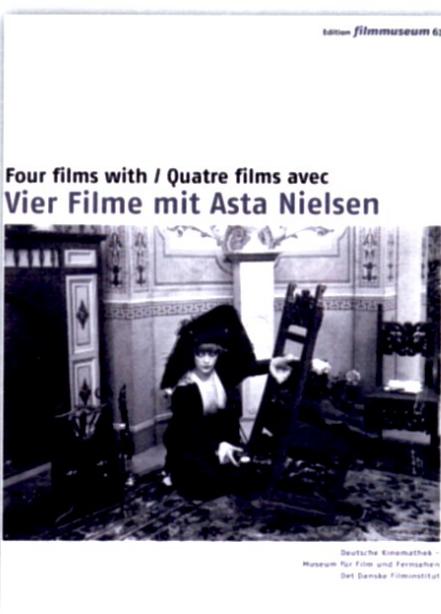
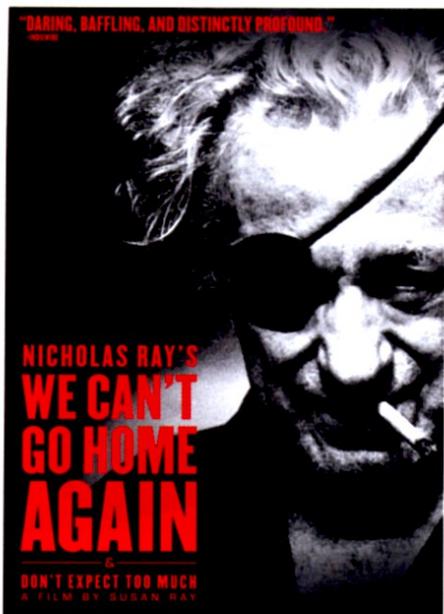
Ozu, Jennings, Gardner: three names which serve well as shorthand for the measure of the art of Harry Tomicek the filmmaker. (Let's use that word here, agree that it's wanting, and replace it subconsciously with *Filmgestalter*). Watching a film by Tomicek is like encountering the whole of cinema—sounds glib, but it's true in a rather hands-down fashion. Tomicek has seen, considered, finally made sense (for himself) of it all (all he knows and had a chance to encounter); his films don't imitate any of the above-mentioned masters, or any other filmmakers past or present for that matter—it's just that they show an uncommon awareness of cinema's possibilities and a will, nay, need, to work with them. That his "earliest" work so far, *Der Zug ein Leben* (started in 1999 and finished, like most of the others, in 2012), opens with a series of canonical train scenes, doesn't contradict this: it's like a birth certificate, a preamble, a position paper for the whole œuvre. Or, perhaps, just a good way of getting rid of certain fundamental inherited images in one's head, confronting them, getting them over with so that one never again has to deal with them—been there, done that. It's certainly no coincidence that the film's title comes only after that appropriated footage-montage; only then does the real film, the ride through the world with Tomicek, begin.

This cine-literateness extraordinaire is put to good use by Tomicek, for whom cinema is simply looking at the world, honouring its beauty, and cherishing life's fleetingness, its paucity. For the last decade and a half or so, Tomicek has been worshiping the moment with a small digital camera (so, yes, his films are not of a photochemical nature, but they look and feel that way, while never denying their digital self). He always takes that camera along, so as to meet The Moment whenever it realizes itself in front of him, to show his gratitude for all the things (impressions, emotions, insights) life offers those willing to accept its gifts. That's the way he himself might describe his creative impulse (in much more delicate and suggestive words, no doubt). Tomicek doesn't look—like all the curious, he finds.

Turns out that the films those few saw were but raw materials. Tomicek only recently, between 2011 and 2013, real-

ly finished some works, although at least one, *Passages... (2.Version)* (2001-12), judging by its title, must have existed in an earlier form. Due to a strategic indiscretion by *someone*, I got to look at a few of these materials, shot in the last decade during summer vacation, as we learn from *Passages... (2.Version)*. Tomicek's longest work so far, with a running time of almost an hour. Looking at these home movie-like tapes, and considering the intimate nature of his most recent work, *Porträt Stanislas T.* (2013), one would suspect that Tomicek's cinema is of a more Mekasian persuasion, and there is certainly an element of that, especially in the way Tomicek shoots (note the click-clicking on the soundtracks). Rare are the instances when he lets the camera just roll, shoots more than a few frames (photochemically speaking) in a row. Read: his films are dense experiences—watching five of them in a row made several audience members dizzy. Others were giddy for the sheer trippiness of that unrelenting barrage of images and sounds. Could very well be that this was due to a vaguely Beavers-ish aspect of Tomicek's art: a vigorous going rigorous sense of structure, a desire for classical forms. No free-form poetry here, no coasting or drifting through the days the way one usually does with Mekas—with Tomicek the incidental unique of every instant caught on tape or film has to find its place in a well-defined, meticulous structure. Due to that, every stream of impressions is like a hit; and they come in quick succession. The result of this strategy is stunning, like drowning in a sea of impressions and presences without ever feeling afraid of getting lost—Tomicek knows when we need a gulp of air. We are in good hands. For that reason, we can let go.

Although Tomicek's films are all shot in the same manner and revolve around the notion of time passing, their metre and moves are surprisingly different. *Porträt Stanislas T.*, the best-loved that Sunday, has a carefree warmth and liveliness unlike anything else in his work so far. The subject did that: Tomicek watching his son getting older. (Most parents make films like that when their kids are more like tykes and still mighty dependent on them; Tomicek instead started shooting when Stanislas was in his late teens, i.e., starting to grow apart from his elders, a young adult looking for a place of his own in the world.) Formally, *Porträt Stanislas T.* feels like the softest of the lot, as if Tomicek went more with the flow instead of making time run his course. *Das blaue Band* (2006/2011) and *Päonien-Quickstep* (2011/2012), in contrast, are more like formalist exercises in montage, the former on the colour blue, which unites the most different spaces and places into a single (e)motion, the latter... Well, that's maybe Tomicek's most difficult-to-describe work: very brief, made around a variety of motives, a tad more free-verse, jazzy than the rest; not a bad feeling, actually, that tickling elusiveness of *Päonien-Quickstep*, beckoning. *Passages... (2.Version)*, again, has an overbearing presence: heat, meadows, trees, bushes, trains passing in the distance, the play of light on a study's wall, life going on and by, shadows growing, nightfall looming. There's genuine greatness to this film, a drive for an all-encompassing vision of existence that few these days venture.



# MONUMENTS, DOCUMENTS, AND DIVERSIONS

## 1. IL CINEMA RITROVATO (Bologna)

DVD AWARDS 2013

Xedition

**Jurors:** Lorenzo Codelli, Alexander Horwath, Mark McElhatten, Paolo Mereghetti, and Jonathan Rosenbaum, chaired by Peter von Bagh

Because we were faced this year with an embarrassment of riches, we adopted a few new procedures. Apart from creating three new categories for awards, we more generally selected eleven separate releases that we especially valued and only afterwards selected particular categories for each of our choices. We also decided to forego our usual procedure of including individual favourites because doing so would have inflated our choices to 17 instead of 11, which is already two more than we selected last year.

Our first new category is the best film or program at this year's edition of Il Cinema Ritrovato that we would most like to see released on DVD or Blu-ray. Our selection in this case is the French TV series *Bonjour Mr. Lewis* (1982), by Robert Benayoun.

## BEST SPECIAL FEATURES ON DVD 2012/2013

*Rameau's Nephew* by Diderot (*Thanx to Dennis Young*) by Wilma Schoen (1974) by Michael Snow (Re;Voir Video). Michael Snow's four-and-a-half-hour opus plays with sound and image to create a cinematic Coney Island of the Mind, or, as one writer put it, something akin to Jacques Tati scripted by Ludwig Wittgenstein. The film comes in a special box with a 184-page bilingual book of essays prefaced by Snow analyzing the film's 25 sequences with the debut publication of original preparatory notes and script.

## BEST SPECIAL FEATURES ON BLU-RAY 2012/2013

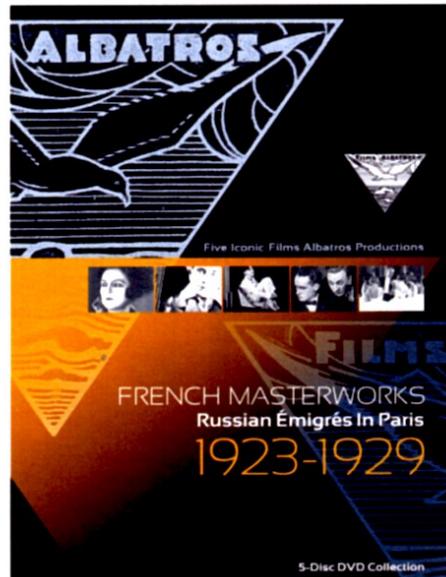
*We Can't Go Home Again* (1973) by Nicholas Ray (Oscilloscope Pictures). Among the rich array of bonus features are Susan Ray's documentary *Don't Expect Too Much* (2011), new extended interviews with Jim Jarmusch and Bernard Eisenschitz, Ray's *The Janitor* (1974), rushes from and interviews about Ray's *Marco* (1977), and a fascinating 1977 profile of Ray made for CBS's *Camera Three*.

For best rediscovery, we also have made two selections:

## BEST REDISCOVERY 2012/2013

*Vier filme mit Asta Nielsen* (Edition Filmmuseum/Deutsche Kinemathek). A double-DVD set presents four German films of the 1910s (*Die Suffragette*, *Urban Gad*, 1913; *Das Liebes*, Magnus Stifter, 1916; *Das Eskimobaby*, Heinz Schall, 1916; *Die Börsenkönigin*, Edmund Edel, 1916) featuring Asta Nielsen. The versatile and intense screen interpretations of one of the great European silent movie stars come to light in all of their shades, from proto-feminist comedies to parts in drag, all the way up to current themes in the financial world.

*Česky Animovany Film 1 1920–1945* (Národní Filmový Archiv). The first installment of an ambitious series of DVDs covering the evolution of animation art in Czechoslovakia from 1920 onwards, in all its forms: experimental, fairy tales, surrealism. Together with the DVD proposing a selection of 30 shorts of the period 1920–1945, the Národní Filmový Archiv of Prague has also published a filmographic catalogue, in Czech and English, covering the 153 animated shorts produced between 1920 and 1945, including three DVDs with 76 shorts.



#### BEST BOX SETS 2012/2013 (THREE SELECTIONS)

#### BEST SILENT COLLECTION

*French Masterworks: Russian Emigrés in Paris 1923-1928* (Flicker Alley). In exile after the 1917 Revolution, creative Russian talent formed the remarkable Film Albatros studio, revitalizing post-WWI French cinema. Five choice films (directed by Mosjoukine, Volkoff, L'Herbier, and Feyder) and a 28-page illustrated booklet with essay and notes on each film.

#### BEST DVD BOX SET

*Pere Portabella. Obra completa* (Frodimag-Intermedio). The long-awaited complete works, 22 films in all, of a major and singular Catalan filmmaker from Barcelona, born in 1927, the Spanish producer of *Viridiana* (1961), whose majestic oeuvre (1967-2011) confounds the usual separation made between fiction and non-fiction, narrative and experiment, politics and meditation, and cinema and the other arts, in such diverse masterpieces as *Cuadecuc, vampir* (1971), *General Report* (1977), and *The Silence Before Bach* (2007). Following a purist strategy, this set of seven DVDs includes no chapter breaks and no supplements, allowing the works to speak for themselves.

#### BEST BLU-RAY BOX SET

*Henri Storck Collection* (Cinematek). A wide sélection raisonnée by a master of documentary in four DVDs covering four parallel sides of his researches—"Images d'Ostende," elegies devoted to the beauties of Storck's hometown and beaches; his pamphlets against capitalism, "Misère au Borinage"; his Virgilian eclogue, "Symphonies Paysanne"; and his films devoted to Paul Delvaux, Rubens, and Herman Teirlinck—all superbly restored.

Another special category:

#### BEST DVD NOT ON THE LIST OF FINALISTS 2012/2013

*Out 1: Noli me tangere / Out 1: Spectre* by Jacques Rivette (Absolut MEDIEN/ARTE). Arguably Rivette's greatest achievement and boldest experiment is not a single film but two radically different works, both of them about the '60s (utopian dreams and desperate retreats, collective work and solitude) that are drawn from the same material—a twelve-and-a-half-hour comic serial, *Noli me tangere* (1971), and an anguished four-and-a-half-hour puzzle film, *Spectre* (1973). This five-disc set finally makes both of these monumental epics available for the first time, with English as well as German subtitles for the serial and German subtitles for *Spectre*, featuring many of the greatest actors in French cinema, including

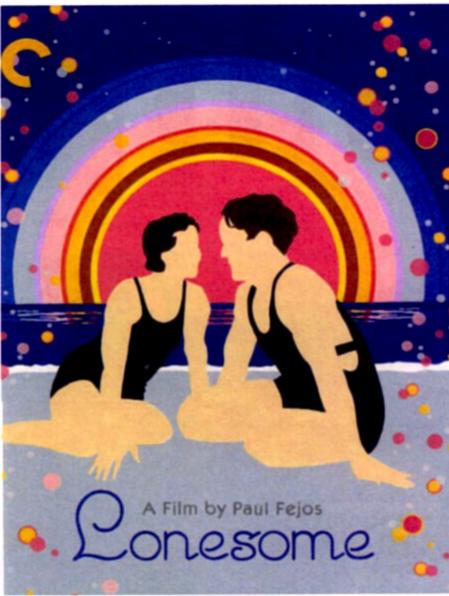
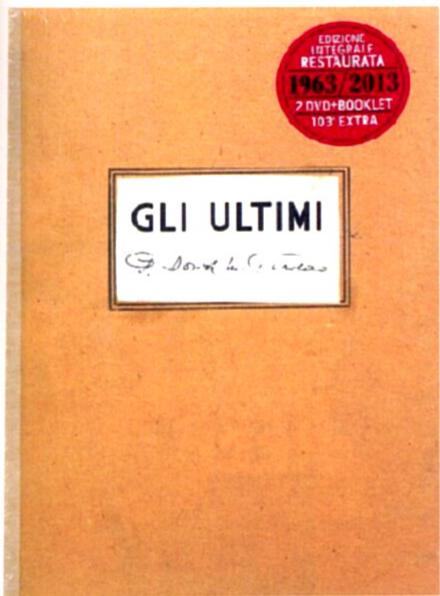
Juliet Berto, Bernadette Lafont, Jean-Pierre Léaud, Michael Lonsdale, and Bulle Ogier, all of them creating their own characters and improvising their own dialogue. A lengthy interview with Rivette is also included in the set.

#### BEST PUBLISHING STRATEGY BY A DVD LABEL 2012/2013

Awarded to BFI Video, for publishing an incredibly wide range of materials that enriches our film heritage, including documentary shorts, sponsored films, experimental works, and amateur films, exemplified by *This Working Life: Steel—A Century of Steelmaking on Film* (1901-1987), *Roll Out the Barrel: The British Pub on Film* (1944-1982), and *The Lacey Rituals: Films by Bruce Lacey* (1951-1967). We also want to mention the BFI Flipside series, which introduces us to a little-known "parallel history" of British cinema including such releases as Andy Milligan's *Nightbirds* (1970).

#### BEST DVD 2012/2013

*Gli Ultimi* (1963) by Vito Pandolfi (La Cineteca del Friuli). This DVD revives an eccentric and forgotten movie almost impossible to see for many years, thanks to a meticulous restoration of both versions of the movie: the complete one, made by the authors Vito Pandolfi and his father Davide Maria Turaldo, and the one six minutes shorter made for public release. As bonus



features, there are auditions that have never been seen before, unreleased interviews, rare documents on film, and a booklet with various interviews and previously unpublished essays.

#### BEST BLU-RAY 2012/2013

*Lonesome* (1928) by Paul Fejos (Criterion). This definitive edition of an exquisite and masterful city symphony and love story from the end of the silent era and the beginning of talkies comes with an excellent audio commentary by Richard Koszarski and, among many other valuable extras, beautiful editions of two features directed by Fejos the following year, *The Last Performance* and a reconstructed sound version of *Broadway*.

2. This has been an exceptional year for formerly inaccessible work of the second half of the 20th century finally becoming available, as evidenced especially by the box sets of Pere Portabella (celebrated in my previous column, and cited above) and André Delvaux (celebrated on my website), and now, most important and most impressive of all, both versions of both versions of *Out 1*, Jacques Rivette's greatest work, on a five-disc set available on German Amazon for 45,99 Euros.

For me, *Out 1*, filmed in the spring of 1970, is both the greatest film made anywhere by anyone about the '60s in the Western world and the culminating late flowering of the French New Wave. (It also confirms

my hypothesis that all of Rivette's greatest films—especially *L'amour fou* (1969), *Out 1*, and *Céline et Julie vont en bateau* (1974)—are those shot wholly or at least partially in 16mm. A lesser example of what I mean, just out from Masters of Cinema, is *Le Pont du Nord* [1981].) For cinephiles who up until now have had to depend on the execrable transfer of the 13-hour *Out 1* available with English and Italian subtitles on various pirate outlets, this is a much bigger event than it might appear to be at first, for several reasons. Let me enumerate just a few of them:

First of all, the transfer of the 750-minute *Out 1: Noli me tangere* is glorious, particularly for the gorgeous colours, fully justifying Rivette's remarks to the late John Hughes in 1974 (available at both [www.jacques-rivette.com](http://www.jacques-rivette.com) and [www.rouge.com.au/4/hughes.html](http://www.rouge.com.au/4/hughes.html)), when it had been possible for Hughes to have seen only the 255-minute *Out 1: Spectre* and *Céline et Julie*:

*JH: I'm very interested in the kind of colour impressionism that I find in your new films. It reminds me of Duras and of Jean-Marie Straub's *Othon* (1970), and I think this impressionism involves an openness to colour and light that is original and astonishing. The play between blues and browns in *Spectre* runs the gamut from total accident to total control.*

*JR: Both *Spectre* and *Céline et Julie* were shot in 16mm. We used the Éclair camera and a Nagra for the sound. At least part of the impressionism you see in *Duras* and*

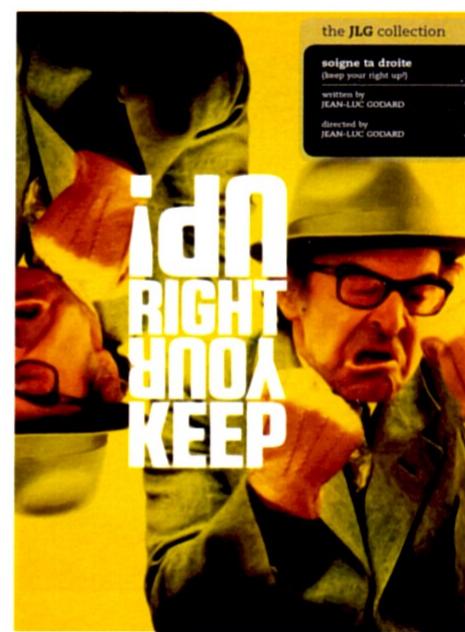
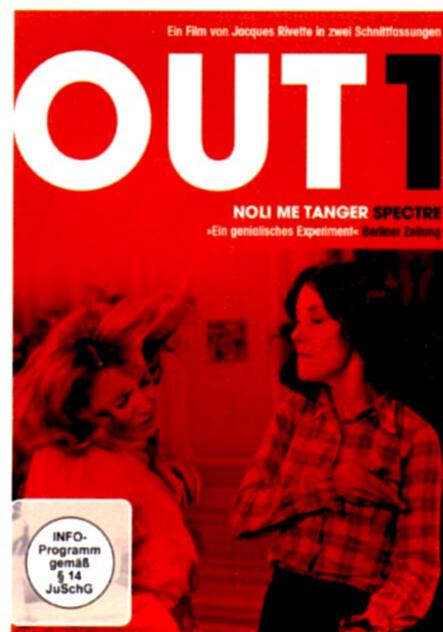
*Straub (who, by the way, was totally hypnotized by a screening of the thirteen-hour *Out*) comes from their low-budget techniques. I aim at something a little different in my recent films, you might almost say that I am trying to bring back the old MGM Technicolor! I even think that the colours of *Out* would please a Natalie Kalmus [Hollywood colour consultant 1933-49]—although the print of *Spectre* at the Festival was too dark, it favoured those blues and browns too much.*

I hasten to add that Rivette's demurals about the lab work on *Spectre* apply equally to the version included in the box set. This is unfortunate from many points of view, but at least it has the advantage of emphasizing even further the degree to which *Spectre* is by no means a "digest" of *Noli me tangere* (a fact that Rivette has also stressed) but a radically different film, even though it's drawn from the same footage: Rivette spent the better part of a year, with a different editor, putting it together, and clearly part of the boon of having the two films available together is the fascination of seeing all the major differences between them, including a good many of the same shots having strikingly different meanings, functions, and resonances (thematically, stylistically, musically, structurally, and in terms of storytelling) in the separate versions.

The saga of what has kept these two versions isolated from one another for almost 40 years is a key part of what has kept the full achievement of *Out 1*—which cries out to be considered as a single two-part work—from receiving its proper due. The first version, conceived as an eight-part television serial (until it was rejected by French television), received only a handful of screenings in its original 750-minute form, most famously as a work print at Le Havre on September 9 and 10, 1971, and then finally as a "finished" work at the Rotterdam Film Festival in February 1989 (which is where I first saw it). By the time it was shown on German television (WDR) in April 1991, Rivette had trimmed it by ten

minutes to its current length, the principal cut being a lengthy *plan-séquence* featuring Jean-Pierre Léaud while his character is undergoing a kind of nervous breakdown. (I described this sequence in some detail in an essay, "On the Nonreception of Two French Serials," included in my collection *Movies as Politics*; it is also available at [www.jonathanrosenbaum.com/?p=19910](http://www.jonathanrosenbaum.com/?p=19910).) *Spectre* has generally had a quite separate history: although it was edited originally to convert the material into a theatrically releasable form (which is how it was shown at first, in Paris at Studio Git-le-coeur for about a week in early 1974, and later the same year at various festivals, including New York and London), it is paradoxically a much more difficult and intractable work, anguished where *Noli me tangere* is relatively light and comic; it wound up getting paired with the longer film, to the best of my knowledge, only at a few scattered Rivette retrospectives.

On the new DVD, *Noli me tangere* is outfitted with optional English (as well as German) subtitles; *Spectre* has only optional German subtitles, but if your French and German are both imperfect, it could serve as an excellent way of improving your French if you see the longer film first (as you probably should anyway), because all the dialogue is translated there. The extras in this release consist of one excellent, extended interview with Rivette, apparently conducted in 1991 and spread out over seven separate segments (which are labelled with the various subjects discussed), and a 20-minute documentary by Wilfried Reichart started in 1972 and completed in 2012, featuring interviews with Rivette, Eric Rohmer (speaking in German), Michel Delahaye, and Jacques Doniol-Valcroze, and also including many production stills of Rivette working on the film. The first of these has only optional German subtitles (it would be great if someone could eventually post an English translation on the internet), the second only an optional German voiceover (apart from the Rohmer interview).



3. Here's another hypothesis, this one about Godard: Not counting his Dziga Vertov period, his most intractable films—and perhaps also his least beautiful—tend to be those made in collaboration with Anne-Marie Miéville. This probably helps to explain why I welcome the release of Godard's 1987 *Keep Your Right Up!* as an Olive Blu-ray (especially after reading so much about it in Daniel Morgan's *Late Godard and the Possibilities of Cinema*), but find his 1978 *Comment ça va*, co-written with Miéville, same label and same format, just as unwatchable as ever. (Although one could quite understandably pass up both for the sake of Criterion's lovely recent Blu-ray edition of *Band of Outsiders* [1964].)

4. At long last, a windfall from Masters of Cinema comprising all the releases I'd previously missed—so many, in fact, that I'll have to deal with many of these in future columns. One is a Blu-ray that I would nominate as possibly the greatest of all their releases to date: a single-disc edition of Carl Theodor Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928) with a 100-page booklet. In fact, the disc gives us at least three separate versions of Dreyer's masterpiece (half a dozen versions if one also factors in the three versions offered without any musical accompaniments). In roughly descending order of preference, the first is the version identified by Dreyer scholar Casper Tybjerg as the "A" negative: in Danish, *Jeanne d'Arc's*

*Lidelse Og Død* (*Joan of Arc's Suffering and Death*), Dreyer's preferred version (which premiered in Copenhagen in April 1928 and subsequently was lost for over half a century until a print was found in a hospital attic in Oslo), shown at 20 frames per second and accompanied on piano by Mie Yanashita. The second is the "A" negative shown at 24 frames per second and with a score by the American avant-garde American composer Loren Connors, and the third, in French (*La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc*) is the 1952 Lo Duca version drawn from the "B" negative (composed of alternate takes), with an orchestral score featuring music by Bach, Scarlatti, and Albinoni (the "Adagio in G Minor," used many years later in Orson Welles' 1962 *The Trial*), as well as some voiceover narration.

The 100-page booklet, no less definitive, includes a substantial section from Jean and Dale D. Drum's excellent book on Dreyer, critical texts by H.D., Luis Buñuel, André Bazin, and Chris Marker, two texts by Dreyer, an interview with Antonin Artaud, a text by Tybjerg detailing many of the differences between the separate versions, followed by five pages of frame enlargements illustrating some of the most salient differences between the Oslo print and the Lo Duca version, and ten pages of further illustrations from the film's production archives. (It's too bad that, along with the other recent MoC releases, this landmark release wasn't submitted to this year's annual DVD Awards at Il Cinema Ritrovato; see above).

5. One of the best things about MoC's dual-format edition of Hitchcock's *Lifeboat* (1944), apart from its persuading me to see the film again, is Bill Krohn's definitive re-valuation and persuasive defense of it as major Hitchcock in the 36-page booklet (which also contains a second essay of his that I haven't yet read, on Hitchcock's half-hour *Aventure malgache* [1944], included as one of the extras, as well as a translation of another essay by Arthur Mas and Martial Pisani about Hitchcock's other wartime short, *Bon Voyage* [1944]). Krohn's *Hitchcock at Work* (1999) is a superb piece of scholarship, and this is an equally fine effort of critical placement that has a good deal to impart about why the film's achievements have been tarnished by its wartime reception and its much-delayed arrival in France, meanwhile working out several fascinating parallels with Hitchcock's preceding feature, *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943). Krohn is no less attentive to the film's flaws and what remains disturbing about them, and he is right to call attention to Manny Farber's original review, which gets closer to the heart of its theatrical style and the strength of its performances than any other critique, even if Farber winds up castigating much of it for theoretical reasons. (By contrast, James Agee's review seems almost completely misdirected, especially when he claims that both this film and *Shadow of a Doubt* are dominated too much by their writers, John Steinbeck and Thornton Wilder respectively; or when he modestly maintains that as an

allegory *Lifeboat* is inferior to allegories by Shakespeare, Kafka, and Joyce. Curiously, both he and Farber manage to misdescribe this tight 98-minute movie as being two hours long.)

6. For all my regrets about the recent publication of *My Lunches with Orson* and the many kinds of ugliness and meanness it exposes (in Henry Jaglom, Welles, and editor Peter Biskind alike), I have to admit that it can be justified by a few nuggets (all of them from Welles)—unlike the even creepier and more carnivorous *Ava Gardner: The Secret Conversations*, whose “co-author”/editor Peter Evans shows a total lack of interest in Gardner's (or anyone else's) films. I was especially intrigued to hear what Welles had to say about Chaplin and Stroheim—and, in the case of the latter, his casual revelation that (a) the “police archive” in *Touch of Evil* (1958) was actually a real archive at Universal, where Welles was able to look up the budgets of Stroheim's early features while his camera crew was setting up lights, and (b) “They [the budgets] weren't that high. The idea that he [Stroheim] was so extravagant was nonsense.” Given the mythical profiles of both Stroheim and Welles, I'm sure that many industry apologists will be eager to dispute this, but one of the benefits of Kino Video's Blu-ray of Stroheim's 1922 *Foolish Wives* (which recycles all the priceless extras on the DVD) is an audio clip from the film's publicist, Paul Kohner, who avows that, contrary to his own promotional cam-

paign, the film cost substantially less than a million dollars.

I have to admit that the patchy visual condition of Arthur Lennig's 143-minute cut of *Foolish Wives* is only intensified on Blu-ray, but of course, when it comes to Stroheim, beggars can't ever be choosers. The same, alas, applies to the first and so far only version of Stroheim's *Greed* on DVD, recently brought out in Spain (under the title *Avaricia*) in a mediocre transfer and with no extras—but even so, still making it possible for me to show the 1925 MGM release version at Béla Tarr's Film.Factory in Sarajevo back in May, along with the Kino DVD of *Foolish Wives*. Even if both films are in tatters, I can't think of any other ruins in the narrative cinema that are quite as passionate or as magnificent, morally or otherwise: Stroheim, an imposter, playing an imposter in the former and creating the densest novelistic characters in all of silent cinema in the latter. (Also from Kino, Todd Robinson's 1996 *Wild Bill: Hollywood Maverick*, subtitled *The Life and Times of William A. Wellman*, is about as watchable and as serviceable as Patrick Montgomery and Richard Koszarski's 1979 *The Man You Love to Hate*, an extra with *Foolish Wives*.)

7. Even on a Criterion Blu-ray, William Cameron Menzies' *Things to Come* (1936) proves to be more of a wheezing soporific to me than it used to be. But in some ways the extras prove to be more interesting than the film itself, especially when it comes to explaining how and why the film is so boring. (Basically, it's the arrogant, untrammeled will of H.G. Wells as auteur that's responsible.) I'm sure part of the problem is that I've never fully warmed to Wells as an SF writer either; as eccentric as this might seem, I persist in finding Olaf Stapledon, his visionary contemporary (and sometime correspondent), far superior.

8. Another instructive extra: a video interview with Simon Callow on the Masters of Cinema dual-format edition of *Ruggles of Red Gap* (1945),



which begins with Callow's confession that he and other English people have never found Charles Laughton's butler in this Leo McCarey comedy film believable—they view him as a figure who seems tailored strictly to American sensibilities.

9. Criterion's Blu-ray of Mizoguchi Kenji's *The Life of Oharu* (1952) is lovely, and I especially value the historical research of Dudley Andrew, both in an "illustrated audio essay" and in his separate audio commentary. But I feel at cultural cross-purposes with Koko Kajiyama's 30-minute 2009 *The Travels of Kinuyo Tanaka*, a Japanese film documenting an extensive good-will tour taken by the future star of *Oharu* to Hawaii and the mainland US in 1949, with both colour and black-and-white footage. In the first minute of the film, which begins with Tanaka's return to Japan, we learn that her Western accoutrements and gestures at that time led to her being ferociously scorned in the Japanese press (this was still, one should recall, during the US occupation, and I suppose a high-profile film actress made an easy scapegoat for suppressed anti-American resentment), and I was hoping to learn more details about this. But this is a Japanese documentary, not an American one—and one with an apparent agenda to restore part of Tanaka's tarnished reputation, not to delve into the causes and circumstances of the tarnishing—so practically all that we get for the next 30 minutes, apart from some fascinating footage, is a lot of unctuous press-release stuff about the tour she was taking.

10. Among the recent Blu-rays from Olive Films, a very mixed bag as usual, are a delightfully silly Kurt Weill musical comedy with Robert Walker and Ava Gardner in her prime goddess mode (*One Touch of Venus*, 1948—one of the countless films that go unmentioned and/or undiscussed in *Ava Gardner: The Secret Conversations*); one mangled and disowned Sam Fuller project starring Burt Reynolds

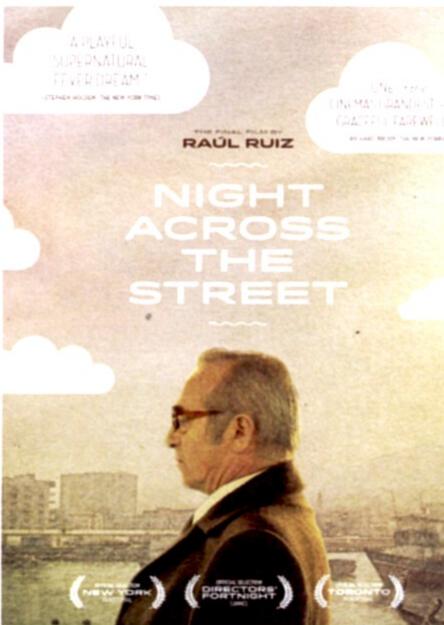
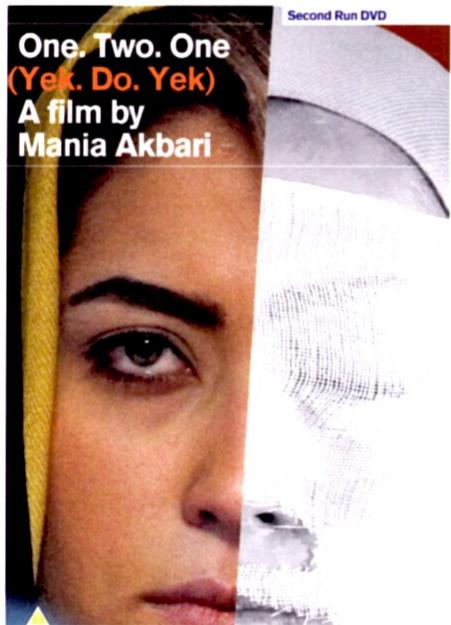
(*Shark!*, 1969), set in the Middle East but filmed in Mexico, which has plenty of Fuller's fingerprints but very little of his dexterity or editing (not a patch on his delicious if threadbare 1952 *Park Row*, financed out of his own pocket, released last year in a definitive Masters of Cinema edition with a wonderful booklet); the ruins of a truncated and censored Fritz Lang film (*Cloak and Dagger*, 1946); Volume 1 of a delightful *Betty Boop* collection, with a dozen gems made between 1932 and 1937 (including a few with patches of live action); a vaguely watchable adaptation of Terry Southern's overrated novel *The Magic Christian*, reeking of 1969, about a billionaire (Peter Sellers) glibly staging an endless series of humiliating pranks for the benefit of his adopted son (Ringo Starr), supposedly in order to scandalize the bourgeoisie (or capitalism, or something like that), that takes the original through a bit of a wringer by changing all the people and settings from American to British; Marlon Brando's irritating debut in an archetypal blending of the worst tendencies of the Foreman-Kramer-Zinnemann crowd (*The Men*, 1950); and a couple of better-than-average noirs (*The File on Thelma Jordan*, 1949; *The Enforcer*, 1951).

11. During all the recent activities related to Allan Dwan in Bologna, New York, and on the internet, three less than fully visible resources are worth noting: a 66-minute version of the delightful 1924 comedy

*Manhandled* in a blotchy but acceptable transfer (included along with Cecil B. De Mille's 1920 *Why Change Your Wife?*) on Volume One of *The Actors: Rare Films of Gloria Swanson*, available from Amazon; *Coffret Allan Dwan: Une légende d'Hollywood*, a bountiful five-disc set from Carlotta in France including five mid-1950s features and many juicy extras, that was originally covered in this column and is, alas, no longer in print; and Donald Phelps' essay "The Runners," the best Dwan criticism I know, not available online but recently reprinted in Philip Lopate's *American Movie Critics* (Library of America).

12. I'm still trying to make up my mind about the "director's definitive edition" of Peter Bogdanovich's 1975 musical *At Long Last Love* on a Fox Blu-ray, most of it drawn from a recently recovered cut that Bogdanovich discovered and approved. I don't find it as offensive as *What's Up, Doc?*, his blockbuster slapstick comedy hit of three years earlier, where so many of the pratfalls, collisions, and smash-ups seemed to be about fatuous, narcissistic yuppies gratuitously humiliating servants and carpenters, but this isn't to say that fatuous, narcissistic yuppies aren't also very much in evidence in this film. I'm also far too fond of Lillian Roth and Lupino Lane in Lubitsch's 1929 *The Love Parade*, one of the obvious models for *At Long Last Love*, to fully accept Eileen Brennan and John Hillerman as suitable or





adequate replacements. But the problems are ultimately existential: Lubitsch's film was offered as a fantasy for audiences suffering from the onset of the Depression (it came out the month after the Crash), but what Bogdanovich is saying to or for 1975 audiences is far less clear. Offering a veritable catalogue of (mainly) forgotten Cole Porter songs obviously provides one kind of service, and the film clearly qualifies as some sort of personal statement, but how the writer-director is actually engaging socially with his contemporaries—which, after all, is a major part of what Lubitsch was doing—remains pretty obscure to me.

13. I experience uncertainties of a very different kind in my first encounter with Mania Akbari's films (apart from her memorable lead acting role in Kiarostami's *Ten* [2002]). Her 2011 feature *One. Two. One*, whose ban in Iran led to her exile and her recent move to the UK (recently released on a PAL DVD from Second Run), is comprised of a series of conversations between two or more characters, always filmed frontally and in long takes (with periodic pans in many cases between the speakers). Seemingly improvised but reportedly scripted and choreographed in detail, it has something to do with—or, let us say, is composed *around*—a woman named Ava whose face has been or was disfigured by acid thrown at her by her husband

or lover. This isn't saying very much, and I'm not even sure I have these minimal narrative details right, but encountering work that's as genuinely original, provocative, and challenging as this tends to make me both speechless and curious. I have to see this one again, as well as more of Akbari's work.

14. Once again, I feel like a sap for having ordered anything from TCM's website—in this case, their *Frank Capra: The Early Collection* (five films and discs, almost half of which fall out when you open the package). Apart from their determination to put all their basic information on the box (year, running time, main credits) in such tiny print that they seem to have learned their trade from designing the last shots in Hollywood trailers, I can't even access the extras on *Rain or Shine* (1930), so what Michel Gondry has to say about this film remains a total mystery. Yet I still have to confess that the exquisite *The Bitter Tea of General Yen* (1933), the last disc in this set, makes me feel like less of a sap. I'm not a huge Capra fan, even after acknowledging that he made a few good films in the '30s, but I would maintain that this is the only great one—and even though it's available on DVD from a few other sources (all of them on PAL, which I haven't been able to check and compare), Joseph Walker's cinematography looks so luscious here that I wouldn't be

surprised to learn that this is the best version around.

15. Maybe it's a mixed blessing, but Walter Salles' 2012 film version of *On the Road* deserves more recognition and serious analysis than it received from reviewers: not only for its sense of period and its landscapes, but above all as a polemical feminist rewrite of the Kerouac novel—partly prompted, I suspect, by Joyce Johnson's memoir *Minor Characters*, not to mention an understandable hesitation about delivering the novel's misogyny intact without any demurals or caveats. If you haven't yet seen the film, IFC's Blu-ray is worth a look for precisely that reason, even if one has to put up with ten minutes of hokey trailers before one can even arrive at a menu.

16. Three other recent DVD releases, all of which are far too important to go unmentioned, even if I don't have enough space or time to review them properly: a lovely Cinema Guild edition of Raúl Ruiz's quintessentially Ruizian final feature, *Night Across the Street* (2012), complete with his preceding, 54-minute *Ballet aquatique* and thoughtful critical essays by James Quandt (in print) and Kevin B. Lee (on video); Re:Voir's Jonas Mekas box set, with six separate discs (each with a separate bilingual booklet in French and English) including *Short Film Works* (1949–2002), *The Brig* (my least favourite Mekas film, 1964), *Walden* (1969), *Reminiscences of a Journey to Lithuania* (my favourite Mekas film, 1972), *Lost Lost Lost* (1976), and *As I Was Moving Ahead Occasionally I Saw Brief Glimpses of Beauty* (2000); and the latest National Film Preservation Foundation chest of emeralds, the single-disc (but jam-packed), region-free *American Treasures from the New Zealand Film Archive*, including priceless early work from Ford, Hitchcock, and Mabel Normand, *Lyman H. Howe's Famous Ride on a Runaway Train* (awesome, 1921), and much more, including a 50-page booklet.



# THE END OF CINEMA

*La última película*

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BY PHIL COLDIRON

What comes at the end of cinema?

Not what comes *after* cinema—a good question for marketing gurus like Spielberg and Lucas and Cameron to lock themselves in a room and argue over until they expire, choking on their own hot air—but right there at the end, in death tranquil or terrifying or both, as the movies take stock of a lifetime of failures (and, okay, more than a few successes). As a moment, it's the end of both the particular (the last movie) and the universal (the cinema): the world-as-projector clicking senselessly onward, the projectionist long gone (or maybe

never around to begin with), and the cinema-as-film caught in the stasis of perpetual motion, run through, ass-end slapping ceaselessly toward disintegration against its one true companion. When that delivery finally comes in the form of a complete formal breakdown—the comfortable order of the classical style churned into a maelstrom of frames and pixels (cf. *Film socialisme* [2010])—will the unifying force of Bazin's trusty old ontology hold? “Now, for the first time, the image of things is likewise the image of their duration, change mummified as it were.” If one accepts that the cinema will come to an end before the world does (i.e., as long as there's still duration; figuring what comes after duration is the real question of what comes after cinema), then there's no reason to think otherwise—even a radically decentred cinema, one whose tatters are sent flying

off in infinite directions, both analogue and digital, would still hold together around this core of mummified change. It might finally be a real big bang for the movies, which is to say that as long as there's a world, what comes at the end of cinema isn't an end at all: it's cinema.

This though still leaves questions about the particular. How will we know when we've come to the last movie? Will the last movie know it's the last movie? What will the view of cinema be from this vantage point at its end? The last movie, as both an expectation and an object, is necessarily subjunctive, a tense that Spanish handles with far more grace than English, so it's with good reason that Raya Martin and Mark Peranson have returned to *The Last Movie* (1971) as *La última película*.

Not so much a remake as an act of salvage—Hopper's film is just one among many sources scrapped and taken for parts, whether jokes or narrative beats or soundtrack choices or shot compositions—*La última película* shifts the location from the earlier film's Peru to Mexico, where Hopper first intended to make it, at another moment in which an end is not an end: the culmination of the Mayan long-count calendar, the event widely referred to in the media as The Mayan Apocalypse. Of course humanity did not come to an end on December 21, 2012, and it remains to be seen whether the New Age reading of the event as a shift between fields of consciousness in fact occurred, but regardless, one could hardly ask for a more apt site at which to situate the last movie, an object which is apocalyptic in the sense that it is, to borrow Jonathan Rosenbaum's description of *The Last Movie*, "simultaneously about many things...and nothing at all"—which could stand to be extended from "many things" to "everything" since what, after all, is the Apocalypse if not the sudden conflation of everything and nothing?

There is at least one apocalypse here that *does* come to pass, as Martin and Peranson retain Hopper's hazy arc of a white man drifting toward personal ruin in the Global South. (Given the fact that the film also retains *The Last Movie*'s staunch commitment to shooting on location, it's an alignment of production and narrative that inevitably recalls everything from Conrad to *Tabu* [1931] to another Hopper project directly referenced, *Apocalypse Now* [1979].) The white man here is a filmmaker played by Alex Ross Perry, who, as in *The Color Wheel* (2011), proves terribly committed to plumbing the depths of his own ego. He is the full embodiment of the interested Western liberal, and as such, fundamentally insufferable—an asshole, as the Sancho to his Quixote, local guide Gabino (Gabino Rodriguez), bluntly puts it during one early bit of ranting about the archeological authenticity of a wall and some trash in comparison to the nearby Mayan ruins.

His filmmaker spends much of the movie spouting off similar pronouncements about his own work, the cinema, and the world in general, all of which are self-serious to the point of delusion, modelled in part after Hopper's similar pronouncements in *The American Dreamer*, the 1971 "documentary" made on Hopper's Taos ranch while he was editing *The Last Movie*. There's an inability to reconcile his rigid sense of superiority—e.g., for him the Mayan pyramids are nothing more than the best movie set that anyone could ask for—with the

messy reality of this place the cinema has drawn him to, which, in an almost cosmic manner, marks him for brutal, sacrificial death. If *La última película* only concerned itself with this rending asunder of the myth of the white explorer-filmmaker illuminating dark worlds, it would at least be commendable as a corrective to a trope that remains alarmingly popular, but Martin and Peranson continually discover new avenues of thought down each of the film's many ruptures—fissures which occur both internally via its heterogeneous approach to form (the film makes use of nine different cameras and seven different shooting formats, including 16mm, Super 8mm, and a variety of standard- and high-definition digital cameras, and will ideally be presented theatrically on an eighth, 35mm) and deployment of perspective or genre (it makes use of tropes from documentary, the essay film, the historical epic, both the structural and lyrical avant-garde, melodrama, and science fiction, among others), and externally, as it calls into question many of the axioms at the heart of contemporary world cinema.

Chief among these is its injunction against the performance of culture as an essential function of the global economy, an intervention that hangs over the film from its opening images, in which a man done up in full Mayan body paint for the benefit of the tourists descending on the region stares into the camera before finally cracking a small, exhausted smile and admitting that he's tired. World cinema today finds itself in much the same place: films must dress up their culture of origin in the ways that will most appeal to the cultural elite who make up film festival selection committees and audiences, a situation which has hardened into a set of rules that are every bit as dogmatic as those kept in place to ensure that Hollywood blockbusters turn appropriate profits on their nine-figure investments. We have reached a point where the whole of world cinema seems exhausted by these demands to continue trotting out the worst aspects of their countries (drug problems, histories of intolerance, authoritarian rule, etc.), as if the only way to get a Western audience to notice their existence is by confirming that audience's fears about a place, and giving them the opportunity to feel suitably horrified—the catharsis of guilt standing in comfortably for any action. Mexico sits at the top of this list, its most lauded films showing the country as nothing but an amoral husk in the wake of the terror of its ongoing drug war. Certainly there is nothing *wrong* with these filmmakers attempting to expose injustice to the world, but one should be weary of a system of financing and exhibition that promotes the perpetuation of such narratives at the expense of any further engagement with the culture.

Martin and Peranson, a Filipino and a Canadian, make no bones about their status as outsiders, using this position as an opportunity to explore the contradictory, or even paradoxical, position of the tourist. On one end, there is Perry's filmmaker, the cynical tourist who claims to know a place better than the locals, and on the other, there are new age pilgrims who have flocked to Chichen Itza for the Apocalypse, naïve individuals convinced that the earnest endeavour of an all-inclusive resort stay complete with daily meditation sessions near the pyramids confirms them as enlightened citizens of the world. For both the cynical and the naïve tourist, the reality of the situa-



*La última película*



tion is one of exploitation: whether finding a film set or finding spiritual purity, the culture of the Other exists only to fulfill a specific need for these bourgeois travellers that isn't fundamentally any different from, say, buying organic kale at Whole Foods. When these two groups finally come into contact in the second half of the film, as Perry and Rodríguez wander the pyramids amongst groups of revellers, loudly mocking the event, Martin and Peranson most clearly open up the space that they have been working the entire time: the film is able to both side with Perry, the cynical tourist who is at least aware of his position as tourist, over these naïve tourists whose exploitation is even more insidious for its lack of awareness, while still undercutting Perry's authority as a commentator with his own well-established inability to view this place as anything other than his for the taking. This double movement of critique leaves only Rodríguez, the native, in a position of clarity, and indeed, if *La última película* is anyone's movie, it's his.

This centrality is confirmed by his involvement with the film's emotional core, a match of sound and image that is, in its absolute simplicity, one of the most beautiful and moving sequences that the cinema has produced. In an early scene, while driving Perry out of town for a location scout, Rodríguez attributes his affection for the region to a set of photos of his parents in this place many years before, pictures that show them deeply in love. In the moment it seems an offhand remark, small talk between strangers to fill the time. The duo continue on their adventures until Perry finds himself thrown in jail for trespassing and the film breaks abruptly from its building nar-

rative momentum to present these photos in a Marker-esque slideshow, accompanied on the soundtrack by John Buck Wilkin's "My God & I," rescued from the background of a scene in *The Last Movie* and returned to a place of suitable prominence. These sounds and images are the sudden swelling of an unchecked emotional force, one that obliterates both irony and sentimentality; the entire film flows out from this single rupture. The effect is not simply to permeate the whole with a deep sense of love, but to recontextualize its reflexive and disjunctive strategies as an experiment in something like radical empathy.

Among the instruments of this experiment, we might mention the presentation of serial takes as looped segments, a conceptual movement which, as in Rivette, collapses the distance between rehearsal and performance (i.e., the film is brought back up to the plane of the fleshy, messy everyday); various instances of filming the production itself, each of which serves to intensify the sense of historical awareness that pulses through the film (it would be hard to imagine a more concise expression of the project's simultaneous engagement with the past, present, and future than the brief shot of an assistant scrubbing fake blood off of the stone steps of a public monument site in the heart of Mérida following a staged sacrifice); and the play of formats off one another in a search not just for their unique affective qualities, but an exploration which the movie extends as an inquiry into their epistemological capacity: by playing up the fundamental inability of these many formats to capture light in a consistent fashion, Martin and Peranson underscore



the ideological function of aesthetic choices. When Rodriguez sacrifices Perry in the aforementioned sequence, the moments shot on 16mm film radiate with a sort of budget magnificence built of soupy light and exaggerated reds which confirms the triumph against the northern imperialist crusader; when the same scene is shown in the flat clarity of digital, it becomes almost silly, the expressiveness of artifice now playing as jarring because of the fact that its textures will be intimately familiar to anyone who has owned a camera in the last decade, the time in which digital photography has quickened its march toward a baseline situated at the full erasure of aesthetic distance. This is not an argument for one format over the other—here I'd like to note that the claims for celluloid made on indexical grounds represent little more than the betrayal of a preference for chemistry over math—but an acknowledgement that even, or perhaps especially, the most banal of budgetary decisions must be examined as ideological concerns.

Seeing these tactics through the reverberations of this originary love, its constant infolding becomes not an acknowledgement of artifice or relativity, but an attempt at turning cinema back against the impulses, the clichés, and the dogmas that might stand in the way of a true image capable of forcing us to confront all that is other in all its complexity. It's in this confrontation that we might reasonably say that everything and nothing finally collapse into one another. Its strongest images—the world seen floating upside down, a rain of meteors on a rear-projected sky, the bustle of a street or a strip club during

Christmas time, two old women perched on a pyramid in the evening sun—are both about everything that is outside of each of us, and *about* nothing, in the sense that they are free of *discursive* distance.

Or at least nearly free, since this attempt must always come up short: the cut, of which every movie must have at least two, cannot avoid introducing a perspective which is the very limit between cinema and the world, though Martin and Peranson, in their dogged commitment to chipping away any trace of bullshit from their cinema—an act undertaken in the name of love, which we might also call truth—have come as close as anyone before them, a heritage that includes Griffith and Bresson, Warhol and Costa, the Straubs and Rossellini, Hellman and Fuller, Frampton and Vertov. These are all makers of last movies, directors committed to pushing the forms of cinema toward the point where they begin to disintegrate, revealing not their artifice, but their capacity for expressing the truth of a situation. In the end, Perry's filmmaker—his fate already sealed, speaking perhaps from the afterlife, moments before embarking on a final journey into the pure intensity of red light (an ending which recalls another great last movie: *Dillinger Is Dead* [1969])—finds his way to something like clarity: “One dot could serve as the punctuation for all that has come before, and the opening salvo for all that will come after.” This explosive rejection of the perpetual stasis of the neoliberal end of history in favour of an infinitely open, historically informed future—this is the logic of the last movie.



# EXPLODED VIEW

WILL HINDLE'S SAINT FLOURNOY LOBOS-LOGOS AND THE EASTERN EUROPE FETUS  
TAXING JAPAN BRIDES IN WEST COAST PLACES SUCKING ALABAMA AIR

BY CHUCK STEPHENS

*"The most memorable sequence of [Chinese] Firedrill, possibly one of the great scenes in the history of film, involves [Will] Hindle lying in anguish on his floor and slowly reaching out with one hand toward the glimmering void beyond his door."*

—Expanded Cinema, *Gene Youngblood, 1971*

The title of celebrated '70s experimental-filmmaking mainstay and current cine-avant-garde Invisible Man Will Hindle's *Saint Flournoy Lobos-Logos and the Eastern Europe Fetus Taxing Japan Brides in West Coast Places Sucking Alabama Air* (1970) is almost impossible to remember. The film itself—a gorgeously photographed, fluidly edited slice of fin de siècle '60s love and dread, shot largely in Death Valley, and both of the Manson Family moment and altogether adrift in time—is impossible to forget. In it, a shirtless bearded dude in flour-sack yoga pants treks and stumbles barefoot through the white-hot desert, pausing occasionally to assume the lotus position and ra-

diate silent "om's into the shimmering heat—Gus Van Sant's *Gerry* (2002) as one man show. Dude might be "Saint Flournoy Lobos-Logos" (whoever that is), we're never really sure. The "Eastern Europe Fetus" shows up, "crawling" through a fiery mandala in some indeterminate space and looking like a cross between *2001: A Space Odyssey*'s (1968) star child and one of those hideous little edible chocolate babies. There are lens flares and eclipse halos, dude's supple movements mesmerizingly match cut and complexly lap-dissolved one into the next, and there are more dudes, and nudes, dancing on balconies to bongos and the tinkling of ice cubes in drink glasses echoing down through the canyon...then the orange slash of a shadow-play knife in the night.

Hindle was born in Shreveport, Louisiana in 1929, went to Stanford, joined the Army, worked for Walt Disney (as an animator), CBS/Westinghouse (directing 150 short segments for public broadcast), and filmed the South Sea voyages of Sterling Hayden's schooner "Wanderer." He began making personal/experimental films in the late '50s, stopped for a while, then resumed in the late '60s. His films began to win numerous small-festival awards and were regularly screened at Bruce Baillie's

Canyon Cinema gatherings. After moving to Alabama (to suck air) in 1970, Hindle finally settled and began teaching filmmaking at the University of South Florida in Tampa in 1973; he stayed there until 1985, and died in 1987. He only made two films after 1972. Most of Hindle's films are still available for rental through Canyon Cinema, even as the American Film Academy's experimental film restoration expert Mark Toscano continues patiently, passionately restoring the filmmaker's work from color negatives and remnant prints. (Don't miss Toscano's fascinating accounts of working with Hindle's original elements at [preservationinsanity.blogspot.com/2011/11/will-hindles-visual-cue-rolls.html](http://preservationinsanity.blogspot.com/2011/11/will-hindles-visual-cue-rolls.html).)

What you're reading here then are only notes on Hindle: your columnist, eager for more for eons, has only ever seen *Flournoy*. Once seen, it's forever stuck, like David Bowie's human-eye lenses in *The Man Who Fell To Earth* (1976), which fleetingly resembles *Flournoy*. Other touchstones include Werner Schroeter's *Willow Springs* (1973), Peter Fonda's *Idaho Transfer* (1973), and Jim McBride's *Glen and Randa* (1971)—visions of flower children and psycho killers at the end of the orgy on various terminal beaches and post-blast bleak-scapes. But that's just *Flournoy*; there's so much more waiting to be rediscovered. We'll leave you with a wish list, and—as Hindle's hand forever reaches toward that glimmering void beyond his door—the hope of something more.

## Will Hindle Work

*Pastoral D'Ete* (1958) 9 min 16mm  
*Non Catholicam* (1957-1963)  
10 min 16mm  
*29: Merci Merci* (1966) 30 min 16mm  
*FFFTCM* (1967) 5 min 16mm  
*Chinese Firedrill* (1968) 25 min 16mm  
*Billabong* (1969) 9 min 16mm  
*Watersmith* (1969) 32 min 16mm  
*Saint Flournoy Lobos-Logos and the Eastern Europe Fetus Taxing Japan Brides in West Coast Places Sucking Alabama Air* (1970)  
12 min 16mm  
*Later That Same Night* (1971) 10 min 16mm  
*Pasteur3* (1976) 22 min 16mm  
*TREKKERRIFF* (1985) 9min  
never completed

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